Overcoming Resistance to Change

organization development programs is a complex rather than a simple problem; it is the cumulative effect of many factors that make up the acceptance or rejection of change.

**Uncertainty Regarding Change: "The Comfort Zone"**

Organization members may have a psychological resistance to change because they want to avoid uncertainty. Past ways of doing things are well known and predictable, and unwillingness to give up familiar tasks or relationships may cause resistance. Many people feel comfortable doing things the same way as always—they prefer to remain in “the comfort zone.” Douglas Solomon, the chief technology strategist at IDEO, which is a consulting firm specializing in innovation, believes that companies who are in their comfort zone are not aware of a need to change and are likely to resist change. He says, “There are still people who say, ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’ And I don’t think these companies are in a good position to really change, because they’re happy with where they are [their comfort zone]. So you have to have a certain degree of discomfort in your business to be willing to make the changes that are necessary.”

**Fear of the Unknown**

A large part of the resistance to change stems from a fear of the unknown. People become anxious when they have to exchange the old and familiar for something new and uncertain. Lack of information or understanding often leaves a vacuum that is filled by rumor, speculation, and insecurity.

**Disruption of Routine**

Proposed changes that disturb habitual routines or patterns are likely to encounter resistance because human behavior is governed largely by habit and routine. If a person tries to cope with a situation and succeeds, that person will usually continue to operate in the same way. The familiar is preferred, and this is especially true when the established behavior has been successful until now.

There is little incentive to change when the old way seems to work. Once habits and attitudes are firmly established, they become the framework through which people respond to their environment and to new ideas. Situations in conflict with the old attitudes are altered and perceived in a way that is congruent with them. The old adage “we hear what we want to hear” has some degree of truth. People may conveniently forget some learning if it is in conflict with their present behavior. The notion of selective perception means that people will successfully resist and negate the possible influence of new information upon their earlier attitudes and behavior.

**Loss of Benefits: "What’s in It for Me?"**

When a change causes employees to feel pressured, they may interpret the change as a loss of individual security. There may be an emotional loss associated with the change, a loss of the former “comfort zone.”

Any proposed change is more readily accepted if it promises to benefit those affected by it, but the motivation of top management to change may not be shared at the operating level. In some cases, resistance may be due to a lack of interest or practical appreciation of the reason for the change. In a similar vein, the expectations of a group will influence its reception of a proposed change. A group that favors a change and expects to benefit from it will more readily change than one that starts with a negative attitude. People affected by a change will naturally be concerned about how the change affects them: Is my job safe? Will I have to move to another city? Can I get a promotion out of this? What’s in it for me? So that more support for the change can be garnered, the change process should at least be initially presented and discussed in terms of how those affected will benefit from the change.

**Threat to Security**

Change sometimes results in a disadvantage to an individual employee or group, and people tend to resist change that threatens the security of their environment. There may be concern about vested interests, such as loss of the job, reduced promotional potential, change in career opportunities, reduced wages or benefits, or greater job demands. There are many instances of work groups withholding a secretly invented tool or improved work method from management for fear the job will be restructured and people laid off or transferred. These fears induce a loss of security and result in resistance to change.
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Threat to Position Power

Any change that causes a manager or group to “lose face” will be resisted. Changes that threaten to lower the status or prestige of the individual or group will probably meet with resistance. For example, a department manager is not likely to favor a change perceived as reducing his or her sphere of authority. Where a proposed change appears to be detrimental to the vested interest of any group, the group will resist the change. Thus, even though a change to an organization’s structure may benefit the organization as a whole, departments may view the change as a threat to their best interests and therefore resist.

Redistribution of Power

A major factor in resistance to innovation is that reorganization invariably implies a redistribution of power and influence. Individuals or groups who perceive a change as lessening their influence will strongly resist it. Those who have the most to lose will be most likely to disapprove of or resist proposed changes.

Disturb Existing Social Networks

Technical changes are more readily accepted when they do not disturb existing social networks. Friendships, social cliques, or informal teams may be threatened by changes. Research evidence indicates that the stronger the group ties, the greater the resistance to change.

Conformity to Norms and Culture

Norms are organized and shared ideas about what members of an organization should do and feel. The members define the norms and enforce individual behavior to conform to them. The enforcement is imposed by the individuals and by the group through peer pressure upon those who do not conform. Norms cannot easily be changed because of their strong group support. This is especially true if an individual attempts to change a norm because of the possibility of exclusion from the group. When a person is external to the group (say, an upper-level manager), the change process may be even more difficult because of lack of familiarity with the group.

The organizational culture includes the language, dress, patterns of behavior, value systems, feelings, attitudes, interactions, and group norms of the members. Larger organizations will have subcultures formed around smaller units of work or social groups. According to the system view of organization behavior, it is difficult to change the ways of behaving in one part of the organization without influencing and being influenced by the other parts (perhaps through resistance). Unless the managers advocating a change begin by considering the possibility of resistance from the organization as a whole, the ultimate acceptance of the change program will be in serious doubt.

Driving Forces and Restraining Forces Act in Tandem

Effective change programs try to increase the driving forces toward acceptance of change and simultaneously to decrease the restraining forces blocking the change. The force-field analysis model is helpful to understand and develop a strategy for implementing the change program. If the equilibrium point in change is to be shifted to the desired goal, strategies must be implemented that decrease the strength of the restraining forces and in tandem increase the strength of the driving forces. This is analogous to the changes in the weather due to high- and low-pressure systems. The weather is a dynamic system in which a high-pressure system increases or decreases while a nearby low-pressure system behaves in an opposite manner. Depending on the intensity of the two systems, there can be volatile changes in the weather or more gradual and subdued changes. Though organization development differs from weather systems in a variety of ways, one being that the OD practitioner attempts to control the change, there are some parallels. Unlike the saying commonly attributed to Mark Twain, “Everyone talks about the weather but nobody does anything about it,” in OD someone is trying to do something about it.

STRATEGIES TO INCREASE MOTIVATION

The chances of success for an OD program are improved if resistance to change can be minimized. It is important to recognize two things about resistance. First, resistance to change can be predicted. Second, resistance cannot be repressed effectively in the long run. In a change situation,
resistance of some type is inevitable, and the resistance can be used to improve upon the changes. The task of the manager and change agent is to utilize creatively the conflict resulting from the resistance for the organizational good. In other words, since it is unwise, and even futile, to try to repress conflict, the objective is to turn the energies generated by the antichange resistance to good advantage.

Resistance to change can be used as feedback about the change. Researchers and consultants of organizational change, Jeffrey Ford and Laurie Ford, said in a *Harvard Business Review* article, “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.”18 Listening to comments and criticisms provides information that can be used to adjust the tempo and extent of the change program. In addition, resistance can provide functional conflict that contributes to the quality of the change program. Questions and objections to the change, which is interpreted by the change agent as resistance, may actually be reasonable concern for what the change may do to the organization or team. Furthermore, the absence of resistance may indicate a degree of disengagement and an indication of future problems.19

Though it is normal to expect some resistance to change, at some point continual resistance to change may be a signal that something is not working in the implementation of the program. The signals include delays and inefficiencies, failure to produce anticipated results, or even efforts to sabotage the change program. There are several methods for dealing with resistance to change.

**Climate Conducive to Change**

The climate and culture of organizations are decisive in sustaining organizational change.20 Creating a climate where everyone involved in a change program feels free and not threatened to communicate with others can minimize resistance in the long run. Attitudes of respect, understanding, and communication will help to break a cycle of reciprocal threat and aggressiveness on the part of the resisters and the advocates of the change program. Also, a climate that focuses attention on the basic issues and the relevant facts and ensures that parties do not sit in judgment of each other will more likely be productive.

**Clearly Articulated Vision**

Closely tied to creating a climate conducive to change is to create a vision for a team, division, and organization. A **vision** describes a desired future state for an organization. A vision can provide the members with a mental image of the future and give them the enthusiasm and motivation to accomplish a common goal and purpose. This will help to give direction to a change program and to provide a benchmark to evaluate the success of the change. Without a well-understood vision, the change is likely to go haphazardly in many unintended directions. For a vision to become part of the fabric of an organization, it requires more than cleverly strung together words or a catchy slogan. The deeds and behaviors of key people in the organization will do more than words to communicate the vision. As an example, if a pharmaceutical company’s vision statement includes the ethical testing of new drugs, and it is disclosed by the Food and Drug Administration that company executives tampered with the results, other employees are less likely to accept the professed vision.

Vision statements for organizations go by various titles. For example, at Johnson & Johnson they call it “Our Credo,” Google has “ten things,” the American Red Cross has a brief “Mission Statement” and a longer fundamental principles statement, and W.L. Gore & Associates has four basic guiding principles. The vision statement for the organization is usually drawn up by the CEO and a committee composed of senior executives. At lower levels, a team may create its own vision statement within the context of the vision of the larger organization. Along with a vision statement, some organizations have a brief motto, slogan, or rallying cry. To combat a reputation of delayed flights, US Airways has a rallying cry. “Airlines, or really any organization, need a rallying cry,” says Robert Isom, the airline’s COO, “especially one that has been the worst of the worst for so long.”21

**Effective Communications**

An effective communication program can minimize the uncertainty and fear of the unknown associated with change. For an illustration, see Figure 3. As the lack of reliable information leads to rumors and uncertainty, information concerning “the what and why” of the change program
should be provided to all organization members. A study reported in the *Wall Street Journal* found that employees are more likely to support decisions when they are told about the rationale. In the study, roughly 300 managers at more than 100 U.S. employers were asked what they knew of decisions and how supportive they were of the decisions. In companies that explained decisions more fully, the employees were more than twice as likely to support those decisions as workers who got less information. Ideally, those affected by the change will have participated in designing the change program. If the reality is that this is not feasible, then these people are more likely to buy in to the change if they are told the “why” of the change.

Employees are much more likely to support changes when they are told about falling sales, sharply rising costs, declining profits, decreasing quality, customer complaints, high absenteeism, and other statistics that compare unfavorably with the competition or where the company would like to be. John Kotter, author of books on change and the role of leadership, has written, “Employees will not make sacrifices, even if they are unhappy with the status quo, unless they believe that useful change is possible. Without credible communication, and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured.”

Change leaders find a way to communicate this information and establish a sense of urgency. General Mills, Aetna Life & Casualty, and other organizations are spending a significant amount of time training production-line employees to read accounting and production documents, and then making sure they have all the relevant cost and production information. This
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Technique, sometimes referred to as open-book management, literally opens the books to employees, so that they can see the company’s financial records, expenses, and sources of profit. A major benefit is that employees are able to analyze and understand the problems for themselves. The importance of change is then appreciated directly by employees at all levels, from line workers to top executives. The longer that members are left to speculate without access to reliable facts, the more likely that resistance will emerge. Most managers underestimate the amount of communication needed, so it is better to use “overkill” than to understate the situation.

At Delphi Automotive Systems, a GM spin-off, the chairperson and CEO allowed the union to bring in an independent auditor to examine the factory’s books. “I’ll do anything to improve communication,” the CEO says. “It’s important that people have trust.”

The advantages and rewards of the communication of proposed changes should be emphasized, because opposition to change disappears as the fears it generates are explained away. Once the benefits from a change program for individuals and the organization are made clear, employees involved can more readily understand and accept the impact of the change. In reference to bringing change to Intel, CEO Paul Otellini said in a Wall Street Journal interview, “I made it my job to communicate, communicate, communicate the positive message. I did open forums, I did Webcasts, I told the employees to send me any question via email and I’d answer them. I wasn’t trying to sell them on the idea. . . . You have to convince them through reasoning and logic, the accuracy of your claims.”

Leadership of Managers

The leadership of key managers in the organization is critical to the success of a change program. Today’s managers cannot have an emotional commitment to the past. They cannot be afraid to shake things up. Employees affected by a change need to be involved and supportive. Leaders with loyal followers set high standards and strive to attain exceptional results. An ongoing project surveying tens of thousands of working people around the world on leadership was reported in Harvard Business Review. The question asked was, “What do you look for and admire in a leader (defined as someone whose direction you would willingly follow)?” The number one requirement of a leader was honesty and the second-highest requirement was that he or she be forward-looking. Additional research shows that workers who have open and strong leaders are more receptive to change than those working for leaders who are driven by politics, territoriality, and inconsistency.

Through such methods as empowering employees and developing high-performance teams, the leader is able to accomplish things that he or she could not accomplish if acting alone. One of the most important roles of a leader is to communicate an image of the future and inspire a shared vision of the organization. The CEO of United Parcel Service, Inc. (UPS), Mike Eskew, expressed this idea well in a Harvard Business Review article he wrote: “[Leadership] requires relentless communication, which is a big part of my job. Perhaps more important, it requires a culture based on an authentic respect for employees and customers.”

Participation of Members

Making sure that the individuals involved in a change are allowed to participate in the decision process rather than forced to go along with it is a basic technique for increasing the acceptance of change. The participation of employees in matters that concern them increases the probability that they will find the program acceptable. People who help to create a program have an interest and ownership in it that is likely to lead to better motivation and understanding. In a research study of employees’ adaptation to organization change, it was found that they were less likely to feel victimized and ignored by the change process if they had an opportunity to express their views and to participate in the change. Chairman of P&G’s board of directors and retired CEO, A. G. Lafley, says of his approach to bringing about change, “I avoided saying P&G people were bad. I enrolled them in change.”

A change program “prepared on high and cast as pearls before swine” will most certainly be destined to failure. Captain Queeg, in the following excerpt from The Caine Mutiny, very enthusiastically expounds a policy of dictated change that later contributes to the crew’s mutiny:

Now, there are four ways of doing a thing aboard ship—the right way, the wrong way, the Navy way, and my way. I want things on this ship done my way. Don’t