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Enabling collaboration by working with resistance

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What is it?

You may have a great idea for change but it may be blocked by resistance from key stakeholders. This section helps you recognise the different levels of resistance and explains how you can understand and work with this challenge.

Resistance itself is not the primary reason why changes fail: it is the reaction to resistance that creates the problem. In other words, if your response is ineffectual or inadequate when people resist a new initiative, your change will not be as successful as it could be.

Even the best plans can be derailed. Conditions change due to varying political forces, new directives from headquarters and changes in personnel and so on. When this happens, resistance to change can take over and managing organisational change becomes especially challenging.

When to use it

To have the best chance of success, you need to transform resistance into commitment. This section helps you start that process by understanding the causes of resistance and how to manage them.

How to use it

1. Spot resistance early and in its many subtle forms. Gather evidence to determine if the potential derailment is caused by technical, financial or human factors – the most common sources of resistance to change. If you can identify the sources, you will be able to address them.
2. Find ways to discover why things are going off track. If you make incorrect judgements, you risk making people more frustrated or wasting valuable time.
3. Identify strategies you can use to turn opposition and reluctance into support.
4. When asked why so many major changes in organisations failed, executives said that resistance was the primary reason. Therefore, if you are serious about creating a shift from scepticism to support for change – or if you want to minimise opposition before it occurs –you must understand the nature of resistance.

When dealing with resistance, your approach must complement the level of resistance you are facing:

Level 1 resistance – information

This is based on facts, figures and ideas. It may stem from a lack of information, disagreement with the idea itself, a lack of involvement or simply confusion. Strategies to address level one resistance are outlined below.

- **Inform people.** Give them all the information they need through newsletters, presentations, discussions, emails and videos. Ensure they understand the proposed change, try to see things from their perspective and understand how the change will impact on them.
- **Engage and discuss.** Give people a chance to engage with the information and reflect on what they hear. Ask them to contribute to the idea or to warn of potential pitfalls. In meetings, be open to real discussion and be willing to be influenced. After sharing your idea, give people the opportunity to share their responses and opinions. Hold meetings in a range of ways and plan in time for people to ask questions and give their input.
- **Reporting back.** Give feedback to explain how your thinking has been influenced by people's contributions. You're unlikely to reflect every suggestion you receive, but it is helpful to explain why you chose the course you did.

Level 2 resistance – physiological and emotional based

This level evokes an emotional reaction to the new idea, typically based on fear. People fear that change will impact them personally – perhaps they think they will lose control over their work, lose respect, become overwhelmed or even lose their jobs.

The fear can be based in reality, or a perception that something bad will happen but the reaction (and resistance) will be the same. With perceptual fear, work can be done to challenge and reality-test in order for people to have a more realistic appraisal of what might happen.

Remember to engage people in ways that address their fears. Listen to those who resist change and try to understand how they feel and why they feel that way. Try to find common ground, incorporating their concerns.

Take the touchstone test to see if your strategies address level two concerns.

- **Build strong working relationships.** If you burn bridges in the course of implementing your proposed change, you are likely to find it difficult to gain support for future changes. Aim to build bridges with those who have a stake in the outcome and involve them in creating goals and plans for the change.
- **Maintain a clear focus.** When people attack your ideas, it's easy to lose sight of your original goals. Ensure you keep your goal in mind while paying attention to the concerns of those who have a stake in the outcome. If you focus only on your goal, you will miss mounting resistance. If you concentrate only on the opposition, you will never know when you have enough support to move ahead.

- **Embrace resistance.** You cannot work through resistance without opening yourself up to those opposing change. Embracing resistance encourages people to talk about their feelings and helps you get to the root of their concern. Learning more about another person's perspective enables you to find common ground and discover ways to transform the negative energy of resistance into positive support for change.
- **Listen with an open mind.** People who fear they have something to lose are naturally reluctant to share their questions and concerns. People are more likely to share their true feelings when they believe we are interested in them. Create a climate of trust and openness by making a commitment to listen to concerns with an open mind. Be willing to tell the truth: honesty can disarm resistance (see also [active listening](#)).
- **Stay calm to stay engaged.** Few leaders are willing to open themselves up to a deluge of criticism: in the short term it's easier to avoid those who resist you. While listening to attacks on your ideas can be very stressful, staying calm will help keep you centred on the issue at hand. As people raise questions about your position, listen attentively and draw them out. Strive for adult-adult conversations and use what you have learned to begin seeking common ground.
- **Join with the resistance.** It is important to seek a neutral zone that attempts to include the interests of all groups. Asking the following three questions will help you do this: 'What's in it for me?' 'What's in it for you?' 'What's in it for us?' As people answer these questions, especially the last one, listen for common fears and interests. Build on these similarities to find a solution that addresses the concern of all parties. By doing so, you can transform opposition into support.

Individual fears

The table below identifies the different types of fear an individual may have and suggests coping strategies and prioritisation.

Figure 1. Different types of fear, coping strategies and prioritisation

Fear type	Nagging question	Response	Priority	Coping strategy
Job loss	Will I have a job after the changes?	Clarify if this is the case. Be prepared to answer tough questions.	High Immediate response required.	Competent HR team, devoting time to those affected by the changes. Assistance with finding new job. Counselling. Stress management. Union support.
Degree of change	Will I have to personally change too many things?	Clarify if this is the case. Emphasise usefulness of changes and benefits in the long run.	Medium to high What is expected of each member of staff?	Communications strategy and clarity in promoting changes. Realistic expectations of amount of change at any one time. Provide training.
Salary and contract	Will there be a change to my contract or salary?	Clarify if this is a permanent or temporary measure, whether this is an incentive for the change to be introduced.	Medium to high Contract clarity needs to be observed at all times.	Knowledgeable and supportive HR team.
Perks	Will I lose my parking space? Will there be changes to my pension/holiday entitlement?	Clarify. Justify actions, be prepared to answer tough questions.	Medium to high	Be aware of perks and how staff view them. Look for alternatives.
Personal status	Will I be gaining or losing status as a result of the changes?	Clarify immediately. Be prepared to answer tough questions.	High	Be honest. Provide personal recognition and support. Identify ways in which status can be enhanced
Physical environment	Will I have to change ward / offices/ buildings / sites?	Clarify at local level if this is a permanent or temporary measure. Are there any incentives for relocation?	Medium to high	Will the new environment be better – if so in what ways? Are there long term advantages? Don't promise what you can't deliver.
Technology	Will I get a new computer, or will I inherit someone else's old machine? Will I have a direct line? Will I be able to cope with the new technology?	Clarify at local level if technology will be affected by the changes.	Low to medium	Deal with uncertainty. Provide training and mentoring where necessary.
Career development	Would the change enhance my opportunities? How would the changes affect my career?	Clarify possibilities for career opportunities.	Medium	Talk 1:1 about longer term possibilities and what needs to be achieved to get there.
Overall personal	What's in it for me? Push or pull?	Clarify issues. Resolve issues or look for alternative solutions.	High	Talk to those most affected and hear their concerns.

Team fears

Managing team and group fears will involve managing changing relationships and sometimes decision-making power (which for those involved will be an individual fear), as well as structural changes in the group composition, status and resources.

Cultural issues, although permeating all categories, will be of paramount importance here. The table below identifies the team level fears and suggests coping strategies.

Figure 2. Team level fears

Fear type	Nagging question	Response	Priority	Coping strategy
Purpose of the team	Are we clear what we are trying to achieve?	Be clear about the new purpose.	High	This requires more than just communication – staff need to work with and explore the proposed new reality.
Change to standards and procedures	Will we be working to different standards?	Clarify if this is the case; justify changes.	High	Immediate uniform response required. Ensure standards and procedures are clear. Communication strategy, backing the business case for change.
Morale and team spirit	Will we get on together?	If values and beliefs are affected at individual level, morale and team spirit might be affected too. Clarification and reassurance is needed.	High	Celebration of success and incentives for change need to be provided. Away days or similar events thinking about the new future.
Training and development	Will we need new skills as a result of introducing changes?	Clarification and training needs analysis to be conducted.	High	Address team needs. Team training can help cement new teams and identify tensions.
Communications within the team and with others	Will we know what's going on?	Identify how issues will be communicated amongst team.	Medium	Provide clear communication structures. Recognise importance of informal as well as formal communication channels. Discuss dissemination plan.

Level 3 resistance – bigger than the current change

This is the deepest, most firmly entrenched form of opposition to change. It occurs when people are actually opposing you, rather than the change itself. There can be various reasons for this: you may have a troubled history, conflicting values or it may simply be because of what you represent (eg union versus management, personal or cultural differences). While it is possible to work with level 3 resistance, it will take time.

- **Continually work on building relationships.** Rumours and assumptions can derail negotiations instantly, so keep doing everything you can to build trust.
- **Begin small.** Start by working on issues where all sides see the benefit and a possible mutual win. Some corporations and unions have weakened level 3 issues by working on areas that are important, but not at the centre of the change. For example, safety concerns are common ground issues.
- **Candid conversation is vital.** Learn the skills of dialogue: talk *and* listen.
- **Support yourself.** It's easy to get defensive but you need to be prepared to engage others. Thorough preparation, self-care such as good quality sleep and exercise and allowing sufficient time to hold the meeting can all help. Breathing exercises can also help you remain calm before tense encounters. Seek the support of a coach or mentor to help you prepare and debrief from challenging conversations and encounters.
- **Involve people in changes that affect them.** Real time strategic change is one approach you could use. Form a planning group made up of a cross-section of stakeholders and devise a plan. Next, hold a meeting for a larger group to review this plan and create a new plan that meets a wide variety of interests. Whichever approach you choose must be done in collaboration with the people who oppose you. Lack of trust is the major reason why they resist. Imposing any strategy, no matter how well intended, will encounter resistance.
- **Be prepared for setbacks.** Working with level 3 resistance is extremely difficult. No single meeting will turn things round: trust is difficult to build and easy to destroy. For example, if you forget to invite someone in on a conference call due to an oversight, it could destroy weeks of good work between you.
- **Be prepared to walk away.** There will be times when the risk or energy required isn't worth it. In these instances, have the courage to walk away.

What next?

Once you have turned resistance into commitment you will be able to move forward with your implementation plans. After that, you will need to consider how to maintain commitment and evaluate the impact of the changes.

Other useful tools and techniques that may help you include:

- [Managing conflict](#)
- [Continuum of commitment](#)

Additional resources

Huczynski, A and Buchanan, D (2013) *Organizational Behaviour*, Pearson Education Limited: Harlow, UK

Maurer, R (2010) *Beyond the Wall of Resistance*, Bard Press: Texas

See also www.rickmaurer.com