

Organizational Change: Breaking through the resistance of change



In my consultations to organizations in the throes of difficult change, I hear about the challenges leaders experience, the problems they encounter, and their frustrations and concerns.

Mostly I hear leaders talk about peoples' resistance to what needs to change. **“I don't understand why they just don't get it,”** leaders say. Sometimes this is about other executive colleagues, and sometimes it is about employees.

Resistance is a human reaction to change when people do not see the need for the change, when they do not have sufficient understanding of the change, and when they are concerned about how the change will affect them personally. To effectively address resistance entails working directly with why people are resisting. The leader's role is to actively and directly focus on the people of the organization and address the underlying reasons for their resistance.

A common mistake leaders make is to focus on information, data, and communications out to the employees; they pass information along in speeches, PowerPoint presentations, and volumes of emails. What does not happen or happens insufficiently is direct and effective engagement with people and their needs. The result is resistance.

In my consulting work I see these mistakes happen over and over, and leaders wonder why people are not enthusiastic, not aligned, and not committed to the changes they are expected to implement.

Often employees do not have sufficient understanding of why these changes are being made and how the changes should affect and involve them. And for many employees the changes are experienced as a personal threat to their jobs, responsibilities, and even their income. The resultant behaviors are commonly referred to as resistance to change.

At the root of resistance are the emotions being activated and felt by people about the changes; these emotions then manifest themselves as behaviors that can become a serious impediment and challenge to implementing the necessary changes. Leaders must give these emotions the attention they require.

The foundational and essential work of leading change is to build understanding and alignment among all employees. It is here, in this process, that leaders can constructively work with resistance and create the necessary alignment. This is essential to accomplish the work involved in bringing about the change. At the same time, this process builds interest and commitment.

An emotional reaction to change is normal

Leaders need to develop an understanding of the fundamentals of human nature. Many people find change challenging, even when they believe the change is for the best, or even when they are excited about the change. The reality of change is that it can evoke anxiety, loss, and fear; it can create turmoil and chaos; it requires moving from the familiar into the unknown and losing a level of comfort. These emotions and reactions are normal and must be anticipated when an organization is implementing changes that affect people, their roles, work, and possibly their income. These emotions affect peoples' work, attitudes, and perspectives.

As human beings we need to be seen, heard, understood, and valued, and we need to create and be productive. Leaders must listen deeply to people to understand what they are thinking and feeling and why. Their emotions need to be known and understood.

Empathize with people about their concerns, fears, and the realities of what they are experiencing. Let them know what is really happening, even if it is difficult for them to hear. As a leader, develop the capacity and make the time and effort to understand people, then respond with appropriate words and actions.

Active engagement is critical

All leaders must be actively engaged in leading the change and must help others be actively engaged. Often resistance indicates there is insufficient alignment and understanding throughout the organization of how the change will be implemented, how critical resources are to be utilized, and what the priorities, outcomes, and expectations are.

Active leadership entails **focusing directly on and with the people** of the organization, guiding and supporting them in the work of the change. The leader's role entails direct dialogue with people throughout all levels of the organization—listening, creating understanding among people, thinking together, problem-solving, and helping people develop the insights needed for them to move work forward.

Go out into the organization and have conversations with people directly. Hold small group discussions. Think about how you can help people, and what they need from you in your leadership role. Make this about them and their part in the change, not about the change per se. It is through this kind of active engagement that together people can build alignment, address how resources will be best utilized, set new priorities, and create plans to meet the goals.

When people understand and have a clearer picture of where they are going and why, emotions begin to settle down and people are more able to engage with the work of change. It is also in direct conversations that leaders can learn if there is sufficient understanding for people to move forward, and where more understanding and alignment needs to be built.

Your response to change impacts other. Bring your own humanness to the conversations with others.

- How do you feel about change?
- How do you feel about this particular change?
- What is important is for you, as leader, to know what you are feeling and thinking, and how that influences your actions, behaviors, and thoughts. What do others sense and perceive in you?
- Are you resistant but trying to put on a positive face and attitude? Why?

- Can you find empathy within yourself for the feelings and perspectives of others? Or are you focused on data and information and approaching conversations from this standpoint?

Leaders must expect resistance; it is a natural reaction to change and it is based in concern and/or fear. The work of leadership is to seek out the resistance so you can engage with it directly. This is an investment not only in the success of the change, but in the people of the organization, and it is an investment well made. The alternatives lead to increased resistance and undesirable outcomes.

Take a few minutes of quiet thinking

1. How do you as a leader lead resistance?
2. What emotions are evoked in you when you are faced with the resistance of others?
3. How are those emotions expressed in your behavior? What is the impact of this on others?

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