

Why Resist Change?

No matter how beneficial or important any change initiative is in an organization, it's not going to be welcomed universally. Quite the opposite – it's almost inevitable that people will resist it, overtly or otherwise. If you are leading or championing a project that involves change on any scale, even the most trivial, you have to expect resistance. And in order to have any chance at overcoming it, you need to know where it's coming from.

People resist change for many reasons. Some of these are rational and well-articulated—for example, if someone's analysis of a situation leads to a significantly different assessment from that supporting the change initiative, they might oppose the change on that basis. In many cases, however, the reasons individuals oppose a given change are less clear-cut and logical. Change by its nature arouses people's emotions, both positive and negative. Resistance is also frequently emotional. Dealing with resistance therefore involves acknowledging the emotions that are involved, and managing them as part of the change process.

Causes of Resistance

Causes of resistance can be generally broken into three categories:

f **Technical:** issues dealing with the alignment and structure of the organization itself, e.g.

- Difficulty learning new skills
- Sunk costs
- Lack of skills
- Lack of critical resources

f **Political:** issues dealing with the allocation of power and resources in the organization, e.g.

- Perceived threats to the “old guard” from the “new guard”
- Established relationships and lines of influence
- Imbalance or self-preservation of power and authority

f **Cultural:** issues dealing with the social fabric and cultural norms of the organization (including employees' emotional relationships with each other and with their jobs), e.g.

- Selective perception

- Locked into the old “mindset”
- Fear of letting go
- Habits and inertia

Resistance based on technical grounds can usually be managed by a technical solution—provide training support, provide necessary resources, manage costs, etc.

Resistance based on a differing assessment of the situation may reflect habitual conservatism (“*If it ain't broke, don't fix it!*”). It might also be based on access to different information than the change initiators used. If that's the case, it is important to consider their data and arguments carefully—they could be right.

Work With the Resistance

Also, bear in mind that resistance is not always the enemy—it can play a useful role in organizational change if you make an effort to view it constructively and manage it with care.

Change in itself is not inherently good.

Change is only as good as its consequences, and these are rarely obvious all at once. It takes time to evaluate them, and it takes time for people to adapt. Resistance can provide a necessary brake to slow down a change process that might otherwise rush ahead too fast..

Resistance can help balance the pressures of internal and external environments, and allow the organization to reach the delicate balance of change vs. stability while avoiding both chaos and stagnation.

Resistance is an energizer. One of the great enemies of change is apathy. Resistance to change can stir people out of their passivity, which in turn provides opportunities to examine and address the problems themselves..

Resistance encourages a search for alternative solutions. The first proposal for change may not be the best way to reach the desired outcome. Through the dialectic of resistance, conflicting opinions can yield alternative approaches that may be superior.