**RESISTENCE – HOW TO SPOT IT AND DEAL WITH IT**

**Signs of resistance**

When resistance to change occurs, it is very helpful to be able to spot it coming and hence respond appropriately.

**Early signs of resistance**

If you can catch resistance early, then you can respond to it before it takes hold, effectively nipping it in the bud.

**Gossip**

When the change is announced, the tom-toms will start beating loudly and grapevine will bear fruit of much and varied opinion. Keep your ear to the ground on what is being said around the coffee points. Listen particularly for declaration of intent and attempts to organise resistance.

Grumbling and complaint are natural ways of airing discomfort, so you should not try to squash it (you would fail, anyway). The biggest danger of it is when it is allowed to ferment in an information vacuum.

Respond to gossip by opening it up, showing you are listening to concerns and taking them seriously, and providing lots of valid information that will fill the vacuum.

**Testing**

Just as a high school class will test a teacher's ability to maintain discipline, so also will some brave soul test out what happens when they resist change. They may, for example, not turn up to a meeting or openly challenge a decision.

How you deal with such early resistance will have a significant effect on what happens next. For example you can jump on the person and squash both them and their words, or you can take an adult position, describing what they have done and assertively questioning their motives.

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| **INDIVIDUAL** | **COLLECTIVE** |
| Individually, people may resist, although thisis generally limited to the extent of their personal power. For those with lower power, this may include passive refusals and covert action. For those with more power, it can include open challenge and criticism.Handle individual action individually, starting with those with greater power. As necessary,you may need to make an example, anddealing first with a senior executive can senda strong signal to other resistors. | When people find a common voice in organised resistance, then their words and actions can create a significant threat to the change, even though they are individually less powerful. Trade Unions are a classic example of this.Organised resistance is usually a sign of a deep divide. People will not go to the bother of organising unless they have serious issues with the change.Manage collectives by negotiating with their leaders (which can be much easier than dealing with a myriad of smaller fires). Youmay well need to make concessions, but youat least should be able to rescue some key elements of the change. You can also 'divideand conquer' by striking deals with individual key players, although this must be done very carefully as it can cause a serious backlash. |
| **COVERT** | **OVERT** |
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| **ACTIVE** | **PASSIVE** |
| Overt resistance does not need to take positive action -- sometimes it can be passive.Active resistance occurs where people are taking specific and deliberate action to resist the change. It may be overt, with such aspublic statements and acts of resistance, andit may be covert, such as mobilising others to create an underground resistance movement.Overt active resistance, although potentially damaging, is at least visible and you have the option of using formal disciplinary actions (although more positive methods should normally be used first). When it is covert, you may also need to use to covert methods to identify the source and hence take appropriate action. | Passive resistance occurs where people do not take specific actions. At meetings, they will sit quietly and may appear to agree with the change. Their main tool is to refuse to collaborate with the change. In passive aggression, for example, they may agree and then do nothing to fulfil their commitments.This can be very difficult to address, as resisters have not particularly done anything wrong. One way to address this is to get public commitment to an action (and you can start small on this), then follow up – publicly if necessary -- to ensure they complete the action. Then keep repeating this until they are either bought in or give in. |

**Rationale for resistance**

The rationale for resistance is often quite straightforward as people justify their actions to themselves. If you want to overcome resistance to change, you must be able to answer the following points.

**I want to stay where I am because…**

Even if you offer me a bowl of cherries, I may not be very concerned to take what you proffer if I am happy where I am now. People who have been in the same place for a long time are usually in this state. They do not need to change and will view any suggestion of change with distaste.

**…my needs are already met here**

Needsare basic drivers of action. If needs are not perceived as being particularly threatened and the current situation is relatively comfortable (particularly in comparison with the proposed change) then I will be happier to stay where I am. If people already have their needs met, then you will need to shake the carpet and provide some sort of threat to those needs so they are no longer sufficiently met for the person to want to stay where they are.

**…I have invested heavily here**

When I have **invested** a lot of time and energy in building up my position, both socially and organisationally, then any change may mean bad news. Social investment creates a person's sense of **identity**. Organisational investment gives them **control**. Sliding down the ladder that I have so painstakingly climbed over the year is a long way from my shopping list.

Where people have invested heavily, you will either have to show them how to get to a similar position in the new organisation or otherwise reduce the value of their investment (for example by moving the people over whom they have social influence).

**...I am in the middle of something important**

When I have committed to achieving a **goal**, either personal or emotional, then a part of my integrity and hence **identity** may be bound up in achieving the goal. When I have partly completed something, I am also affected by the need for **completion**, such that I will feel uncomfortable with stopping now.

When people are busy, find ways for them to complete the work in the shorter term, perhaps by nudging their goals so they have less to do to complete. If possible, turn their work towards something that will be useful for the new organisation.

**I do not want to change because…**

Even if I am not that happy where I am, I still may not be particularly interested in moving forward with the change.

**…the destination looks worse than where I am now**

Although I want to move, the final resting place of the change looks significantlyworse for me than the current position. I feel it is like jumping out of the frying panand into the fire.

If you want people to voluntarily move, then it must be to somewhere better than they are now. You can create this in two ways: first by making the present position worse (though be careful with this!) and secondly by building a rosy vision to which people can then attach their dreams.

**…there is nothing to attract me forwards**

If the change is nothing to do with me, if the benefits are all for other people or the general organisation, if I just do not buy the 'vision' as sold, then I will feel no **pull** and I will not buy into the change.

You may offer forth a brilliant vision, but do the people buy it? Make sure your communications are clear and couched in terms that people can understand and buy into. Make your visions inclusive, such that people really can and will buy the change.

**…I do not know which way to move**

Even if I buy into the vision, I still may not know which way to jump. Some change projects sound wonderful, but people are left wondering what to do (even the managers). Grand plans need to be turned into tactical detail in which people can see and easily take the step forward.

**…the journey there looks painful**

The final destination may be great, but the journey from here to there looks very uncomfortable. The anticipated pain of the transition is more immediate than the distant and hazy future, and I respond more to this than to any inspiring vision.

Make sure the transitional period between now and the final change does not appear so uncomfortable that people refuse to join you. In practice, it may not be that bad -- what counts, though, is the perception of the people, so design the transition well and then communicate it well.

**...the destination or journey is somehow bad or wrong**

If the transition or the final destination somehow transgresses my **values**, then I will judge it to be bad or wrong and will be very loathe to join the party.

Be careful with the change in working around established organisational and general social values. If you must break an unwritten rule (such as getting rid of people) then do so with appropriate consideration and care.

**…I do not trust those who are asking me to change**

If my experience of you is that you have been untrustworthy in the past, then I am not likely to buy your vision of the future. If you are going on what I perceive as a perilous journey, then I will not **trust** you and will not join you.

The integrity of **leaders** is a very important attribute. If you want people to **follow** you, then you must give them good reason to trust you.

**I am not going to change because…**

Even if people do not want to change, they may still have to do so, albeit defiantly. Some people, however, have the wherewithal to refuse.

**…I am able to ignore the change**

One of the questions I will ask is 'What happens if I do not go along with the change?' If the negative implications for my non-compliance are negligible, then I can happily not join in.

This sort of situation occurs when the person in question is so valued by the organisation that the idea of them leaving is unthinkable. This is often where difficult choices around change take place. What do you do with the laggards? If this problem is not addressed, then the people around them may take their lead and before long you have a silent revolution on your hands.

**…I have the power to obstruct the change**

Another reason why a person can happily ignore the change is because they can stop it. People in senior positions often treat change as being a good thing – as long as it is for someone else. When faced with change themselves, they may do whatever it takes to scupper the change, for example by refusing to give needed access or other support.

This is a good test of the senior sponsor of change -- which may need to be the most senior officer in the organisation. Those who actively oppose the change must be dealt with -- preferably kindly and in in an understanding way, but ultimately in a firm and final way.

**Overcoming resistance**

**Dealing with resistance**

Resistance can often be recognised in individuals who:

• directly or indirectly challenge the change

• don’t acknowledge the change

• won’t act when trying to implement change

• are openly hostile or plead ignorance to the change

To overcome resistance, you firstly have to understand where the individual’s resistance is coming from and why. It is not as simple as sitting them down and expecting them to open up to you and explain why they think the change is unnecessary or a waste of time. You may need some help in trying to overcome some of these challenging behaviours.

A couple of options that may be useful to overcome resistance include:

**Get buy-in.**

When people accept and understand what is going on, they are more likely to act upon it. Getting buy-in is one of the most difficult things to achieve in relation to change management, but it is critical because it is the hurdle that either makes or breaks the project. To help get buy-in you will have to commit time and effort to listening to people and explaining, perhaps several times, why it is happening and what is in it for them. Some people will find it easier to buy in than others and you will have to persevere with those who take longer to get there.

**Use change agents.**

If you can identify a few key players who are bought into the change and use these people to your advantage by trying to get them to explain the change better to other team members.

**Win over those ‘on the fence’.**

Those who are perhaps sitting on the fence with change can either fight with you or against you. You need these people on your side. It is crucial to get them to understand how this change will eventually help them better perform their job and how it benefits them.

**Openness and two-way communication.**

Ask for suggestions on how the change can flourish. When people feel empowered and in more control of the situation, they are more likely to accept it. This is about engaging your team and listening to what they have to say.

Take their suggestions and give them the justified evaluation that they deserve. If you are not going to take their suggestion forward then let them know why. Likewise if you are taking a suggestion forward then communicate this to them.

**Be transparent.**

It is human nature to fear the unknown and what you don’t understand – especially if it seems like a threat to you. Try to be as transparent as possible. Start from the beginning and lay down all the details – if you don’t know something then be honest about it, find out the answer and then get back to them. Secrecy is not an option. Individuals will question you and managements’ motives if you are not completely transparent with them.

**Tips on how to respond to unexpected resistance in a meeting**

What happens when you are in the middle of a conversation or meeting and someone speaks out against the change?

**Pause**

The natural tendency of many people is to respond immediately, perhaps butting in or cutting the other person short. The voice may be authoritarian and tinged with anger.

But think how this appears to other people? The message being sent is 'public disagreement is not allowed'. A likely effect is that the person resisting now has the sympathy of others (and may recruit the others to their cause). It is also very likely that the resistance will just go underground.

So the very first thing is to bite your lip, hold your tongue and count to three. Take a moment to **pause** and assess the situation. What are others doing? Is the person speaking cautious or bold? What does the **body language** tell you?

**Listen**

The next step is to listen carefully not only to what they are saying but also to how they are saying it. Listen for the deeper messages between the lines**.** Listen to their **fears**, **hopes** and ambitions. What are their values? Hear the **tensions** and **emotions**. Notice how they are **coping**.

You can also draw out further information, using probing questions to ensure you have the whole story.

**Empathise**

Make your initial response one that **empathises** with their position. Show first that you understand (even though you may not agree) and respect their right to voice an honest opinion.

This and other previous action will have won you many friends - perhaps even the person in question who may have been expecting you to resist their resistance (which is just what it would be) and is preparing for a fight. When people expect a fight and find only concern, the **surprise** is likely to change their opinion.

**Think**

Before you open your mouth, think hard about what you are going to say and how you are going to say it. Done wrong, a response will show your empathy to be false and may cause a bitter backlash.

**Respond**

Respond in a way that offers the other person a dignified way out. Seek win-win.

Use their language. Reframe their position to show a bigger picture. Use depersonalised language – we and you – them and us. Try and remember what the point or task of the change is.