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# DEMYSTIFYING THE LEGEND OF RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

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## Abstract

Nothing is permanent except change. Many authors stress that the reason for the failure of many change initiatives can be found in resistance to change. Resistance to change introduces costs and delays into the change process that are difficult to anticipate but must be taken into consideration. Undoubtedly the resistance to change is key topic in change management and should be seriously considered to help the organization achieve advantages of the transformation. Considering the importance of resistance to change, this paper aims to delve deeper in this field through theoretical exposition of the concept, elaborating more on the literature involving change, types of change coming up with the major reasons why change initiatives fail in some organizations. As the next step we define resistance and we classify its types and as the final analysis we introduce a new managerial approach for overcoming the resistance to change and ensuring the according-to-plan implementation of a change initiative.

**Keywords:** Change, Failure of Change Initiatives, Overcoming Resistance to Change.

## Definition of Change

"Change, the process of moving to a new and different state of things is a constant for organizations. Managing organizational change is, in very large part, about managing the "people" aspects of that process". (Smith, 2005a:408) or in other words Change is a word with which we are all familiar, meaning to alter something.

"An according to Jack Welch If we are still doing things now the same way you did them five years ago, we are doing something wrong". (Hines, Aller-stead, McKinlay, 2005:18)

"Most of the time change has a major impact on the entire organization and is usually strategic, large-scale, chaotic, complex, and/or radical in nature. Examples of change initiatives and activities include:

- Installing an Enterprise Resource Planning system (ERP)
- Creating a new high-performance culture
- Focusing on business and operational excellence
- Conducting mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures, and alliances
- Installing major new technologies
- Executing strategic and business plans
- Becoming more customer-focused
- Becoming a global company
- Improving customer service

- Desiring major growth and expansion
- Downsizing, outsourcing, and major cutbacks
- Restructuring and redesigning the organization
- Improving Six Sigma and quality
- Changing supply-chain management
- Developing and deploying major new products
- Transforming an entire enterprise
- Significantly increasing creativity and innovation
- Creating new businesses" (Hines, Aller-stead, McKinlay, 2005:11).

"More than two-thirds of business leaders resist change, they have a vested interest in protecting the status quo, do not like to lose control, and may not feel comfortable about what to do about the needed changes" (Hines, Aller-stead, McKinlay, 2005:22).

"As a result an overarching integrative theme of leadership literature is the concept of change. Through times of major change, effective leadership has been attributed to successful outcomes. The concept of change within the leadership literature adds a temporal dimension to leadership and supports the notion that leadership can be regarded as a process" (Kan, Parry, 2004:468).

## **Types of Change**

"Organizations typically respond to the challenges of new technologies, new competitors, new markets, and demands for greater performance with various programs, each designed to overcome obstacles and enhance business performance. Generally, these programs fall into one of the following categories:

- **Structural change.**—These programs treat the organization as a set of functional parts—the “machine” model. During structural change, top management, aided by consultants, attempts to reconfigure these parts to achieve greater overall performance. Mergers, acquisitions, consolidations, and divestiture of operating units are all examples of attempts at structural change.
- **Cost cutting.**—Programs such as these; focus on the elimination of nonessential activities or on other methods for squeezing costs out of operations. Activities and operations that get little scrutiny during profitable years draw the attention of cost cutters when times are tough.
- **Process change.**—These programs focus on altering how things get done. You’ve probably been involved with one or more of these. Examples include reengineering a loan approval process, the company’s approach to handling customer warranty claims, or even how decisions are made. Process change typically aims to make processes faster, more effective, more reliable, and/or less costly.
- **Cultural change.**—These programs focus on the “human” side of the organization, such as a company’s general approach to doing business or the relationship between its management and employees.

A shift from command-and-control management to participative management is an example of cultural change, as is any effort to reorient a company from an inwardly focused “product push” mentality to an outward-looking customer focus none of these change programs are easy, nor is success ever assured.

A structural change—such as the acquisition of a complementary business—might appear easy, since the entire deal can be handled by a small platoon of senior managers and consultants, with input from the board of directors. But such an operation results in a need for more amorphous changes, such as eliminating redundancies and getting the

acquired units to work together smoothly, which can be enormously difficult and time-consuming. And the record shows that few of these initiatives come close to meeting the expectations of their supporters. On the other hand, a change that focuses on a discrete operation, such as improving the customer service function, may be both easier to handle and more likely to succeed, since it involves a small activity set. The employees involved in that function may be able to handle the job by themselves, perhaps with a bit of coaching from a knowledgeable consultant. If your organization is contemplating a change program, it will be helpful to determine which of the categories described above the initiative falls into, and to predict how it is likely to affect the overall company. Envisioning potential stumbling blocks in advance could prevent difficult issues from arising during the change process, and help ensure the success of the operation". (Luecke, 2003:9).

### **Why Change Initiatives Fail?**

"The vast majority of major organizational change efforts fail to achieve their intended and desired outcomes". (Hines, Aller-stead, McKinlay, 2005:18). "The study of why change efforts fail has benefited from increasing interest in the academic and practitioner literature. It is estimated that up to 70 percent of new programs – from re-engineering, installing new technology to changing culture fail. They state that many senior managers think change will occur through company-wide training programs and that employee behavior is changed by altering a company's formal structure. While many studies focus on the factors impacting change, the link between resistance and change has been only explored to a limited extent. In resistance, people try to preserve their sense of meaning and identity, by retaining familiar ways of doing things. The resistance phase is about loss: loss of control, familiar attachments, community, and structures... During resistance, people feel worse, stress is higher and performance is at lower levels". (Hacker, Washington, 2005:402).

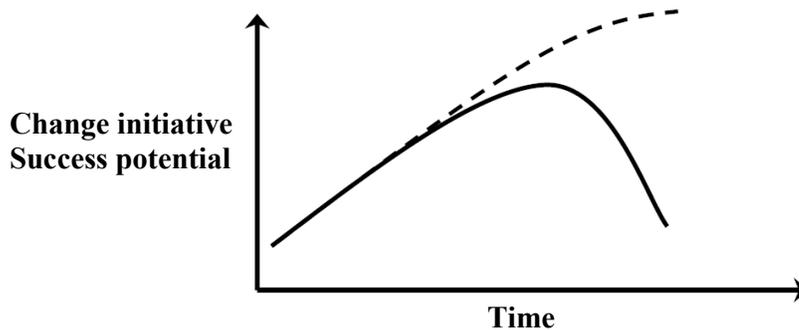


Figure No.1  
Change resistance – what and why?

"As already stressed change is a ubiquitous element of organizational life, so too is resistance to change. Understanding why and how opposition to change occurs, and developing the ability to respond effectively to manifestations of change resistance, is crucial to the success or failure of efforts to achieve organizational change. Change, in Organizations as elsewhere, involves moving from a known state to a new state – one that is to some degree unknown. Change involves letting go of things as they are in order to take up new ways of doing things. Organizational change challenges the status quo and it may challenge the values and perceived rights of workers and work groups. People working in organizations respond to change in many different ways". (Smith, 2005b:519).

## Resistance Defined

"In order to understand the concept of employee resistance, it is critical to define what is meant by the term resistance. Early researchers on the subject, defined resistance to change as behavior which is intended to protect an individual from the effects of real or imagined change. Some define resistance as any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo or employee behavior that seeks to challenge, disrupt, or invert prevailing assumptions, discourses, and power relations".( www.newfoundations.com) "For some, change is welcome – fresh and exciting. These people, the early adopters and change leaders, tend to welcome and embrace change enthusiastically. Others may be more cautious – responding to change by seeking to test and examine changes before proceeding. For some, change may threaten their established values and understandings and therefore be deeply unsettling. For this latter group change is something to be strongly resisted" (Smith, 2005b:520). "“Resister” typically describes anyone who refuses to accept the change, or who doesn’t change as fast as we do. As such, a resister is considered an obstacle to be overcome. Those labeled resisters are viewed as people with poor attitudes, or lacking in team spirit". (Luecke, 2003:9). "Employee resistance can be a significant deterrent to effective organizational change. Organizational change can generate skepticism and resistance in employees, making it sometimes difficult or impossible to implement organizational improvements. Although it was once accepted that everyone resists change, we now know that this is incorrect. How people are treated and how the change is implemented can have considerable influence on employees' resistance to change". (Folger, 1999:35).

## Stages in Reaction to Change Verses Resistance

"Most people eventually adapt and are reconciled to change, but not before passing through various psychological stages. One way to think about these stages is through the concept of risk. According to one theory, change requires people to perform or perceive in unfamiliar ways, which involves risks. Those risks potentially threaten a person’s self-esteem. Understandably, people are uncomfortable with risk and tend to avoid it when they can. When they cannot, however—as when they’re roped into a corporate change initiative—adaptation to change tends to proceed through predictable psychological stages. In some respects, these stages resemble the grieving process a person experiences after the loss of a loved one". (Luecke, 2003:9).

As expected the resistance decreases through these stages, as depicted in Figure No.2

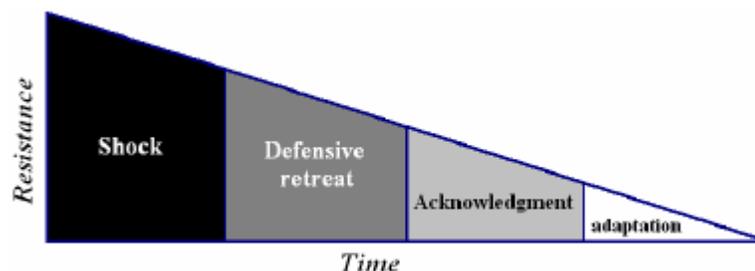


Figure No.2

"The main issue in the management of change is how long the whole stages of change settlement within an organization take? Most people eventually internalize the change, make any needed adaptations, and move on".

(Luecke, 2003:87). Acceptance and adaptation means relinquishing the old situation, as well as the pain, confusion, and fear experienced in the earlier stages of change, but how can change managers reduce this tension, fear and confusion and how is it possible to squeeze the time span of cascading a change initiative within an organization? How can we prevent resistance rather than overcoming it? The answer can be simply found in the degree that an organization and its people are change-ready.

## **Change Readiness – Why Is It Important?**

"It is people who make up Organization and it is they who are the real source of, and vehicle for, change. They are the ones who will either embrace or resist change. If organizational change is to take hold and succeed then Organization and the people who work in them must be readied for such transformation. Change readiness is not automatic and it cannot be assumed. A failure to assess Organizational and individual change readiness may result in managers spending significant time and energy dealing with resistance to change. By creating change readiness before attempts at organizational renewal begin the need for later action to cope with resistance may be largely avoided. An investment

in developing change readiness – at both an individual and whole-of-organization level – can achieve a double benefit. Positive energy goes into creating preparedness for the changes and, in turn, there can be a significant reduction in the need for management of resistance once organizational revival is underway. If change readiness is important, how then might this best be accomplished?

These key steps are salient:

- creating a sense of need and urgency for change;
  - communicating the change message and ensuring participation and involvement in the change process; and
  - providing anchoring points and a base for the achievement of change"
- (Smith, 2005a:409).

## **Emotional and Psychological Factors Triggering Resistance**

Besides the factor that facilitate change by achieving change readiness before the implementation of a change initiative within an organization there are some psychological factors involved that can serve to further facilitate the painful and stressful atmosphere that may be caused during and after the implementation of a change program, that will no doubt lead to severe resistance from the personnel side. Some common statements by the personnel facing a change initiative are as follows;

- "I believe that management's motives for this change are different from those stated publicly.
- I believe that management has a "hidden agenda" in promoting this change.
- Management has been honest in conveying the reasons for this change.
- Management is trying to hide the reasons for this change.
- There is more to this change that management is admitting.
- I believe that management's intentions in introducing this change are very different than they are telling employees.
- Management has been honest in stating its objectives for this change.
- I think that management would misrepresent its intentions to gain acceptance for a decision it wanted to make.
- If I was given a choice, I would not allow management to make decisions concerning employee well-being.
- When it comes to make decisions that affect me, I am never given a choice of expressing my views and opinions although I've earned it". (Stanley, 2005:444).

As can be felt these common complaints and expressions all emanate from a sense of skepticism, cynicism and lack of trust in the management or the team leading the change, as soon as a change initiative is introduced the first thing that the people within an organization ask is What's In It For Me(WIIFM)? How trust can be created and how the sense of cynicism and skepticism can be wiped off the organization in which a transition or transformation is going to come about? The more the employees are involved in the change initiative especially before the organization sets off on a journey toward change and transition, the less they feel that they are being lied to and the management is dishonest, instead they feel they are the ones in charge and nothing's going to be imposed on them and more surprisingly they start to think optimistically about the reason and the motives behind the change initiative and little by little they come to the conclusion that the change is for their own good .

### **Resistance Emanating from Existing Backgrounds within the Organization**

"Resistance to change can be seen as a function of different backgrounds, that constitute different realities for the participants, realities that are difficult to challenge from wrong reality point of view, therefore a careful identification of backgrounds can lead to prevention of resistance that may be caused by which, the backgrounds are namely;

- The complacent background A complacent background is constructed on the base of historical success: the organization that has been successful, whether by innovation or by persistence, has established a background conversation that is a variant of "We will succeed in the future the way we had in the past".
- The resigned background Resigned backgrounds are constructed from historical failure, rather than from success. In the organizations where things have gone wrong, the conversations that constitute a resigned background have accumulated to establish a theme of "This probably won't work either".
- The cynical background The cynical background is constructed, like the resigned background, from historical failure either directly or vicariously experienced through stories and narratives of others' experiences. But conversations about the cause of the failure give us the difference: in the resigned background conversations, the cause of failure is assigned to oneself or one's group or organization, but in the cynical background, the cause of failure is assigned to a "real" or fixed external reality, and the other people or groups". (Ford, 2002:111).

As a result the change proposal must be prepared based on the background of the people of the organization in which the change initiative is going to be implemented, otherwise it will be faced with extreme resistance and it may either require a lot of effort from the change agents or turn up to be a failure.

In most of the cases however, despite all the preventative measures taken by the change agents and the change managers for avoiding resistance, resistance occurs during the implementation of a change initiative an active or passive resisters line up in front of the flow of change within the organization. In such cases some classic methods of overcoming resistance to change shall be applied to shorten the period between shock and adaptation within the stages of change process and ensure the successful implementation of the change initiative. These methods are summarized in Table No.1.

Approach	Commonly used in situations	Advantages	Drawbacks
<b>Education and communication</b>	<b>Where there is a lack of information or inaccurate information and analysis</b>	<b>Once persuaded, people will often help with the implementation of the change</b>	<b>Can be very time-consuming if lots of people are involved</b>
<b>Participation and involvement</b>	<b>Where the initiators don't have all the information they need to design the change, and where others have considerable power to resist</b>	<b>People who participate will be committed to implementing change, and any relevant information, they have will be integrated into the change plan</b>	<b>Can be very time-consuming if participators design an inappropriate change</b>
<b>Facilitation and support</b>	<b>Where people are resisting because of adjustment problems</b>	<b>No other approach works as well with adjustment problems</b>	<b>Can be very time-consuming expensive and still fail</b>
<b>Negotiation and agreement</b>	<b>Where someone or some group will clearly lose out in a change, and where that group has considerable power to resist</b>	<b>Some Times it is a relatively easy way to avoid major resistance</b>	<b>Can be too expensive in many cases if it alerts others to negotiate for compliance</b>
<b>Manipulation and cooperation</b>	<b>Where other tactics will not work, or are too expensive</b>	<b>It can be a relatively quick and inexpensive solution to resistance problems</b>	<b>Can lead to future problems if people feel manipulated</b>
<b>Explicit and implicit coercion</b>	<b>Where speed is essential, and the change initiators possess considerable power</b>	<b>It is speedy, and overcome anykind of resistance</b>	<b>Can be risky if it leaves people mad at the initiators</b>

Table No.1 (Darling, 2003:36)

## Summary and Results

According to Charles Darwin "in the struggle of survival it's not the strongest of the species that survive, it's the most responsive to change", and it's most evident in the competitive atmosphere in which businesses are, going through changes has become an undeniable process that's linked to the survival of the firms, however change initiatives fail in most of the cases despite all the efforts mainly due to the resistance by the people within the organization. The history has proven that whenever and wherever there is change there is resistance, so managers can never turn a blind eye on the highly probable resistance that may block the flow of a change initiative within an organization, therefore, predicting, preventing and diffusing the resistance is placed at the top of the change management action plan. As we all know prevention is better than cure, as a result in this paper we first brought some methods for preventing resistance to change that were namely, achieving change readiness, involving the employees before and after the implementation of a change initiative and predicting the resistance based on the existing backgrounds.

Last but not least as mentioned earlier in case of confronting resistance despite all the preventative efforts some predefined methods of overcoming resistance to change were listed along with their advantages and disadvantages and the situations in which the have to be applied.

To sum up, avoiding change within an organization is similar to trying to swim without getting wet! So managers must first firmly believe that change is a part of normal organization life and can not be avoided but should be

embraced, if the belief is firm enough, the message of change is clearly communicated throughout the organization, a right target setting for planning the change initiative is carried out and the right implementation tools and methods are chosen, there's a high probability that the resistance, if occurs, is not only destructive but also constructive that not only serves to delay and impoverish the change process but also serves to further accelerate and elevate the success of a change initiative within an organization.

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