



RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL
CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

In today's economy, organizations are struggling to cope with the rapidly changing market place. Efforts are made to adapt, innovate, and embrace new ways of doing business.

But something is not working!

Our research indicates that over two thirds of all major change initiatives prove to be disappointments or outright failures (Watson Wyatt, McKinsey).

Change fails for numerous reasons. Sometimes the company's culture simply doesn't tolerate change. People aren't ready for it yet, and they resist it. Maybe the change was ill-conceived, poorly thought-out, or even unnecessary. Perhaps the needed resources weren't available, or the timing just wasn't right. But one of the biggest obstacles to change is the behavior of leaders. Not only can leaders fail to manage change effectively, but their behaviors can make things even worse, resulting in a situation where it would have been better to do nothing!

WHY RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE?

Most employees don't like change because they don't like being changed. When change comes into view, fear and resistance to change follow – often despite its obvious benefits.

Employees fight against change because they:

- ▶ Fear to lose something they value
- ▶ Don't understand the change and its implications
- ▶ Don't think that the change makes sense
- ▶ Find it difficult to cope with either the level or pace of the change

Resistance emerges when there is a threat to something the employee values. The threat may be real or it may be just a perception. It may arise from a genuine understanding of the change, or misunderstanding, or even almost total ignorance about it.



TOP TEN REASONS FOR RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

1. Lack of compelling case for change

One of the primary reasons for resisting change is the lack of a compelling case for change. The inability to answer a key question, “what’s in it for me?” or WIIFM is a cause of concern. When the case for change and its associated benefits aren’t clearly understood by all it may create a perception that the risk of change is greater than the risk of standing still.

Making a change is all about managing risk. If an organization is making the case for change, it needs to set out in stark, truthful terms why it believes the risk situation favors change.

2. Vision not shared by all

Vision plays a key role in producing useful change by helping to direct, align, and inspire action. Managing major change tends to be a discovery process. Even if the organization, employees in charge carefully, define a Vision beforehand, they still have to refine the Vision and improvise the path as they go forward.

As the Vision evolves, not all concerned may share the same perspective – and, this, in turn, creates resistance to change

3. Timing

Timing is often a reason for resistance to change. Organizations tend to have many initiatives going on at the same time, which diffuses the importance of any particular program while stretching resources too thin.

Typically, most organizations can only deal with one or two major initiatives at a time.

4. Disruption of culture or group dynamics

We, as human beings, are a social species. As employees, we become and like to remain connected to those we know, even at times to our detriment. If you ask employees in any organization to do things in a new way, as rational as that new way may seem to you, you will be setting yourself up against all that hard wiring, all those emotional connections to those who taught your audience the old way - and that’s not trivial.

A little good diplomacy and pragmatism at the outset can stave off a lot of resistance.



5. Concerns about future competency

This is a fear employees will seldom admit. But the change in organizations requires changes in skills, and some employees will feel that they won't be able to make the transition very well. They don't think they, as individuals, can do it. The hard part is that some of them may be right. But in many cases, their fears will be unfounded, and that's why part of moving employees toward change requires you to be an effective motivator.

Never underestimate the power of observational learning.

6. Employees feel overwhelmed and overloaded

When introducing a change effort, the organization needs to be aware of change fatigue as a factor in keeping employees from moving forward. If an organization has been through a lot of upheavals, employees may resist change because they are tired and overwhelmed, perhaps at precisely the time when more radical change is most needed! Also, major organizational change is seldom trouble-free.

The destabilization creates a new set of problems increasing job stress while adding to the workload.

7. Employees have a healthy skepticism

It's important to remember that few worthwhile changes are conceived in their final, best form at the outset. Healthy skeptics perform an important social function: to vet the change idea or process so that it can be improved upon along the road to becoming reality.

An organization ready to institute change needs to make a diligent effort to listen and pay attention to its employees' skepticism because some percentage of what they have to say will prompt genuine improvements to the change idea (even if some of the criticism provided is based more on fear and anger than substance).



8. Employees fear hidden agenda

Let's face it, most employees in an organization consider change agents to be a motley crew – folks who cannot let a good thing alone! If the organization seeks to promote change, not only can it expect to encounter resentment for upsetting the established order and fears of hidden agendas among the leadership and would-be performers.

Employees may harbor doubts about the real intent of the change. Some employees may feel, that the change is being initiated to perhaps increase the sphere of influence of the change agent, or an individual or a business unit. Perhaps, even eliminate potential opposition or competition through later stages of change.

9. Anticipate a loss of self, status, and quality of life

Real change reshuffles the deck a bit. Reshuffling the deck can disrupt the sense of self. And, it can also bring winners . . . and losers. On one hand, some employees will gain in status, job security, quality of life, etc. with the proposed change, and on the other hand, some will likely lose a bit. Sometimes change on the job gets right to a person's sense of identity. When resistance springs from these identity-related roots, it is deep and powerful. To minimize its force, change leaders must be able to understand it and then address it, acknowledging that change does have costs, but also, (hopefully) larger benefits.

Change does not have to be a zero-sum game, and change can/should bring more advantages to employees than disadvantages. However, some employees will be aligned against change because they will clearly, and in some cases correctly, view the change as being contrary to their interests.

10. Employees firmly believe the proposed change is a bad idea

It's important not to ignore when employees have genuine, rational reservations or objections. Not all resistance is about emotion.

To win employees' commitment to change, you must engage them on both a rational level and an emotional level. Failure to listen to and respond to employees' rational objections and beliefs is ultimately disrespectful to them.

Sometimes, the proposed change is truly a bad idea!

