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# Engaging with Resistance to Change

Roy Smollan takes a fresh look at what resistance is, who resists, why they do so and how organisations can better handle opposition to change.

Those who lead and manage organisational change often deal with what they term "employee resistance". This is usually portrayed as negative behaviour which undermines the effectiveness of the change. The conventional wisdom is that resistance must be "overcome" and many books and magazine articles teach managers how to do this. However, there are a number of misconceptions about what resistance to change is, who resists it and why, what it means to the organisation and why and how it should be managed. This article examines these issues and provides evidence from research studies, the media and personal experience of common perceptions about the nature of resistance to organisational change. Managers need a richer understanding of the phenomenon so that its value can be appreciated and its negative effects minimised.

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*This article is based on the author's own consulting and extensive field-based interviews with those managing organisational change in New Zealand.*

## What is resistance to change and why is it seen as negative?

In an engineering magazine article one writer labels resistance to change a "brickwall" and a "dangerous roadblock to transformation"[1], while a computer magazine contributor calls it "one of the nastiest, most debilitating workplace cancers… there isn't a more potent, paradoxical or equal-opportunity killer of progress and good intentions."[2]

Resistance is thus viewed as a destructive force that runs counter to the interests of the organisation. However, in many cases the more pressing issue is that managers become frustrated when their own goals are not being achieved. They blame this on stubborn and recalcitrant employees who are unwilling to accept the inevitability and irrefutable logic of the impending development. Resistance is frequently seen as a form of refusal to do what is required or as evidence of a half-hearted effort.

A closer analysis of resistance reveals a more complex process involving a number of common assumptions (points) and alternative interpretations (counterpoints).

*Point: Resistance is contrary to organisational interests.*

Counterpoint: There will be cases where employee resistance undermines the change, but it may prevent the organisation from making costly mistakes. Change may involve some risk and change leaders, whose reputations and careers could be on the line, often have either miscalculated the benefits or risks or have unconsciously maximised the former and minimised the latter. Several years ago the Auckland University of Technology came close to merging with Unitec. Opposition from various stakeholders caused a rethink among AUT's senior management (some of whom were also opposed to the merger) and it was canned. It was strongly believed that as a new university AUT would suffer if it were linked to a polytechnic with different resources, reputation and history.

*Point: Resistance is destructive and selfish behaviour that involves refusal, subversion or sabotage.*

Counterpoint: While staff may take negative legal and illegal, ethical and unethical action, many may instead raise questions, complain or engage in other forms of debate that highlight the dangers of the proposed change. Disquiet, reluctance or dissent do not equate with refusal or more extreme responses. They may simply be reflecting doubt or anxiety or the need for more information and time to think. Or, they may in fact be taking the moral highground, arguing for principles and values that supposedly underpin an organisation's traditions and culture; for example: 'We say the customer comes first, but this change undervalues our customers.' A number of managers I interviewed in a recent research study reported that although they argued against specific change in management meetings it was not thought professional to reveal this to staff at lower levels. As one put it: "In a business you can't have rogue senior managers. They should leave. If you're a senior manager you absolutely need to support the business, that's what you are paid for." Thus his resistance took two forms. He had initially argued in the executive meetings against the restructuring of his company and later negotiated his exit. Other managers I spoke to also voiced their opinions in management meetings but then some complied with the agreed direction while others left.

*Point: Resistance is conscious and deliberate action.*

Counterpoint: Resistance may occur on cognitive (thought), affective (emotion) and behavioural (action) levels. Employees may think that a change is unnecessary or harmful or doubt that it could be successful. They may experience negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration or anger because the outcomes of change may disadvantage themselves, or others, or the organisation itself. Often there is an unconscious or semiconscious sense of reluctance or denial that translates into inertia. Perceptions and feelings are seldom recognised as resistance because they do not always lead to negative behaviour. However, while they may not trigger overt resistance they have a corrosive affect on the commitment to change of employees, who may respond with apathy or mere compliance, rather than with the engagement that change leaders are hoping for. Several people I interviewed remarked that they felt "disempowered", "disenfranchised" and "disengaged" and eventually left their organisations. Others retreated to a state of cynicism where the pronouncements of more senior management were treated with scorn or disbelief. One claimed: "I've never known a change process that added something, it is always taking away and it's always pitched positively and people always know that's a crock."

## Who resists change and why?

Resistance to change is usually attributed to "workers" who refuse to carry out the legitimate instructions of their bosses. Some academics have treated organisational change as a site where the power of the worker (at times in collective action) is overtly used to negate the power of the owners or managers. Others note the more covert means of workers asserting their rights or demonstrating their displeasure with change.

*Point: Workers resist change required by managers.*

Counterpoint: All stakeholders may resist change. Managers at all levels (even executives) may resist change that the board wants or that their colleagues approve of. The collapse of the merger talks between AUT and Unitec was anecdotally ascribed in various conversations to the opposition of senior management and professors. One of the people I interviewed in my research was the general manager of an organisation that was taken over. When she queried certain aspects of the changes that were introduced she was substantially undermined and marginalised by the new owners and directors. Another interviewee was a human resources manager tasked with implementing a raft of changes as a professional services firm moved from a partnership to a more corporate model. Some of the most vocal resisters were the partners. What is seldom recognised is that change may be proposed by employees but resisted by their bosses or more senior managers. Change is also often resisted by external stakeholders, such as Government, suppliers, customers and community groups. For example, the sale of Auckland International Airport to overseas investors was stymied by the Government, the corporatisation of Fonterra has been opposed by most of its member-farmers and the creation of the Auckland 'Supercity' was criticised by many groups and individuals.

*Point: People resist organisational change due to selfishness.*

Counterpoint: Although this is a valid point, it is only natural that people resist change where they believe they will lose - particularly when they anticipate or experience poorer working conditions, lower remuneration, fewer privileges, lower status, a loss of identity and even the loss of their jobs. In addition, people are not only concerned for themselves. Altruism often runs deep and the plight of those who lose in organisational change can evoke empathy and support. This may be seen as forms of resistance, particularly when action is taken on their behalf. One of my respondents remarked: "I had some empathy for some of my team mates" and the anger experienced "is probably more attributed to the lack of concern... being shown to some other members of the staff." Additionally, it may be felt that change, or the way it is implemented, is not appropriate for the organisation. One interviewee said, in relation to the major restructuring his manufacturing firm went through: "Things were taken too far. Too many people were taken out. Too many mistakes were made."

*Point: People resist organisational change through ignorance.*

Counterpoint: Again, there may be a measure of truth in this. However, it is not necessarily ignorance that drives resistance; it may be a different interpretation of events and issues, or a lack of trust in management to deliver fair and favourable outcomes. In a recent New Zealand study of change in the health sector[3], two separate professional groups were found to be guided in their reaction to new initiatives by different sub-cultural imperatives. This was construed by some of those involved as resistance. Accusing employees of ignorance can be a managerial attempt to stigmatise employee opposition. I have sat in meetings in various organisations where managers lamented the fact that employees simply "didn't get it" or got it too slowly. One commentator on change refers to the "marathon effect"[4] – frontrunners in city marathons are often well down the road when others have not yet begun.

*Point: People resist all change.*

Counterpoint: A Fortune magazine writer claimed that "All change creates winners and losers in an organization and the caveman part of our brains is still wired to defend against loss…So people almost always resist change."[5] This is an exaggeration - employees do not always lose in a change. Indeed, working conditions, remuneration and status may all improve. Many of those I interviewed welcomed the changes they experienced, partly because of personal gains made (at nobody's expense) and partly because the changes led to increased organisational effectiveness. What should also be acknowledged is that employees may welcome some aspects of a change but resent others. One manager I interviewed moved to a new site and a new role when his company was taken over. He appreciated a more constructive organisational culture but disliked certain tasks and the shabby office he was allocated. Similarly, people may resist unfavourable outcomes but believe that decision-making processes were fair, or resent unfair processes even though outcomes may be favourable.

## How managers can better deal with resistance to change

While resistance may not be inevitable, as some have suggested, it may be anticipated and, to some degree, 'managed' before or when it is manifested. Just over 30 years ago the *Harvard Business Review* published an article by Kotter and Schlesinger[6] entitled 'Choosing strategies for change'. The subtitle noted the importance of using appropriate methods to "overcome" resistance, although elsewhere the authors used more neutral terms such as "deal with" or "forestall". The article has been quoted in most textbooks on management, organisational behaviour and organisational change, and therefore many people attending academic and training courses have become familiar with their recommended approaches. The six strategies they proposed were education and communication, participation and involvement, facilitation and support, negotiation and agreement, manipulation and co-optation, and coercion. They advised that each of the strategies has its advantages and disadvantages and that situational factors need to be taken into account. Their advice is sound although their options may be too limited.

What follows, therefore, is not a recipe for success, given the contextual nature of each type of change and the differing personalities, abilities, experience, perceptions and feelings of the various stakeholders. Rather it is a set of guidelines that managers need to reflect on.

- Assess the potential impact of change on various stakeholders – individuals, groups, departments and organisations. To facilitate this, wherever possible discuss the proposed change with the stakeholders and engage their views. Participation might produce better decisions and the process of inclusion itself sends a welcome message to those affected and enhances the prospect of greater commitment. Opposition may turn into collaboration or compromise.
- Understand that there might be winners and losers and that people naturally defend against loss, not against change itself. Together with affected stakeholders try to work out how to either minimise the losses or compensate people for them.
- Note that people react (and resist) on cognitive, emotional and behavioural levels and that these reactions are not always aligned.
- Handle resistance with care. Do not assume that it is wilful or ignorant. Do not equate doubt, dissent, disagreement and alternative proposals with refusal, disobedience and disloyalty. Understand that resistance may be conscious, semiconscious or unconscious and that behavioural resistance may be overt or covert.
- Consider resistance as an orange light, not a barricade to be stormed. The management proposal or action may not have been thought through well enough and alternatives may be more appropriate.
- Before choosing strategies to deal with resistance, consider their ramifications and, in particular, the power of other parties to undermine the effectiveness of the change or to derail it altogether. Will participation simply waste valuable time while problems grow or opportunities wither? Will coercion or manipulation get the job done but alienate the staff in the process, leading to more subtle forms of resistance? How helpful – and costly – will emotional and tangible support be?
- Whenever possible aim for just processes and outcomes and underline them with regular, full and honest communication. Laying people off by email or text message – which has been done – exacerbates resistance to change.

In conclusion, resistance is not the scourge it is often made out to be. In dissecting the steep decline of one insurance giant, *Fortune* journalists reported that: "Change was embraced at AIG, but not dissent. Early on [CEO] Greenberg dismissed internal resistance to his innovations as 'the little thoughts that little men have.'"1 While the problems experienced by the company could not be attributed entirely to the CEO's legendary arrogance, it does highlight the need for managers to engage with opposition to change in more productive ways. A number of academics have called for the term 'resistance to change' to be retired, partly because it is misunderstood and partly because it is an assumption that penetrates – and tends to dominate – talk about change. This may be wishful thinking but managers of change do need to view resistance in a different light.

## End notes


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## Further reading

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