Resistance to change can take many differing forms for many different reasons. Whether the change initiative is departmentally specific or large-scale, resistance is an inevitable aspect of organizational life. As consultants, coaches and mentors, one of the most effective ways we can aid in transitional periods is by possessing as much knowledge about resistance as possible. The reasons, types, behaviors and motivating factors all determine the success of our work, and ultimately our clients’ future.

DEFINITION OF CHANGE

‘The process of moving from the current way of doing things to a new and different way of doing things’. ~William Bridges

‘Moving from the old status quo.....’ ~ Unknown

DEFINITION OF RESISTANCE

‘Behavior which is intended to protect an individual from the effects of real or imagined change’ ~Alvin Zander

‘...any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo’ ~Zaltman and Duncan

WHY PEOPLE RESIST

There are 3 primary reasons behind resistance.

1. Loss Of Self, Power, Influence Or Perceived Value

People many times view change as a statement that they are underperforming or not doing a good enough job. They see the impending change as a threat to their established reputation, quality of life or future with the company.

- ‘What will my new role be’?
- ‘Will I still have the same power and influence after the change’?
- ‘Will people still come to me with their questions’?

2. Having To Learn Something New

Most people that resist change fear having to learn new skills, concepts or policies. Whether it’s learning a new computer system, customer service skills or even how to get something approved, change threatens their current status-quo. The way ‘they’ve always done it’ works just fine and the thought of changing behavior scares them.

- ‘Will I have the ability to learn the ‘new’ way of doing things’?
- ‘Will I have to change my behavior’?

3. Lack Of Understanding On ‘Why’ They Need To Change

The majority of people who resist change simply don’t understand why things need to be different. ‘It’s the way we’ve always done it’ is the typical response from this group.

WHO RESISTS

Understanding why people resist change is only part of the equation. Having an explanation of WHO resists is another key component of dealing with and managing this process. Although there are many hybrids of the groups listed below, typically we can separate people into 1 of 3 categories:

1. WILLING & ABLE
   These employees are engaged in the change. They are motivated to be a part of it, and can act as strong advocates and change agents with others.

2. HESITANT BUT OPEN
   This group is unsure about the change and it’s effect on them, but they are willing to listen and make an informed decision.

3. RESISTANT TO CHANGE
   This group will require the most time by the change leadership. These employees have typically been with the company for the longest period of time and typically do things their ‘own’ way. These are the employees who see no need to change the current status quo and are vocal about their resistance.
HOW PEOPLE RESIST

Now that we’ve taken a look at ‘WHY’ and ‘WHO’ resists, let’s now look at the ‘HOW’ behind resistance. Typically, people who resist change do it in 1 of 3 ways.

- **COGNITIVE:** This is the idea that employees can resist change through their negative thoughts. This could include resisting the people who are driving the change, the idea of change, or the process itself.

- **EMOTIONAL:** Employees who resist emotionally are the easiest to identify. They typically will visually show how they feel through aggression, frustration, outbursts or even arguing.

- **BEHAVIORAL:** This style of resistance is usually found in employees who act in ways that typically undermine the change effort. They may defy the change through acts of omission (accidentally forgetting to do things) or may outright sabotage the program.

STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE AND MANAGE RESISTANT EMPLOYEES

**Over Communicate**

Give all relevant information about the change:

- Why are we changing?
- Communicate what the process will look, sound and feel like to the employees
- What will the roles be? How will their positions change, or will they?
- What will the timeline look like?
- Clear expectations and success criteria

**Seek Buy-In**

Look to gain agreement and understanding of:

- Why the change should be made
- What the benefits to them, as employees, will be
- What success will look like to them

The most effective way to gain buy-in from a group going through change is by asking open-ended questions and challenging assumptions. By simply reframing the above-mentioned questions, you can design a simple, yet effective discussion that facilitates not only an understanding of the transition, but also their agreement to participate. Validating and joining resistant employees in their confusion or hesitancy will not only empower those who are resisting, but also help alleviate questions in others.

The questions can be as simple as:

- Why do you think we are making these changes in the organization?
- What could some of the obstacles be?
- What are the benefits of making these changes?
- How will you participate in this change?
- How will you know if we’re successful?

**Provide Training & Tools**

In order for an organization to make a significant change to their business, considerable time must be spent on training and preparation. Most resistance stems from a feeling of loss and fear. By providing the needed training, information and skill-based preparation, employees will be set up for success.

**Reinforce & Follow-Up**

To keep momentum moving forward during the change initiative, focus on:
• Rewarding the correct, new behavior
• Praising positive changes publicly
• Assessing team and organizational progress and direction regularly

Most resistance that we see in organizations is rooted in preserving the present status quo. By openly addressing all aspects of the resistance, and embracing the fear that people innately experience with change, we will successfully move forward, and inevitably create sustainable effects.

References: