

Leading Change

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To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.
—Winston Churchill

The typical managing change article tells us that change is good and advises that, if you follow certain steps, you can successfully change your organization. The unspoken assumption is that change is a rational process, which is susceptible to good management technique. Experience provides a different perspective. In a 1992 study of Fortune 500 companies by William Schiemann, company executives reported that less than half of their major organizational change efforts were successful. What were the reasons? Sometimes there was disagreement about company strategy and sometimes poor follow through, but the main reason for failure was employee resistance.

Let's look at two examples of resistance. They come from one of the really good books on change, Beyond the Wall of Resistance by Rick Maurer.

Washington Redskins

Since 1961, the Washington Redskins had played at RFK Stadium in the District of Columbia. However the demand for tickets exceeded the stadium's capacity, which was the smallest in the NFL. In 1992, the Redskin's owner, Jack Kent Cooke, decided to build a new stadium. He secretly met with Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder. They worked out a deal; and, in the summer of 1992, at a surprise press conference, they announced that they were moving the team from the District of Columbia to Alexandria, Virginia. They showed a map of where the stadium would be located. They explained that there would be a subway stop added to handle game day traffic, and they unveiled a model of the proposed stadium.

Almost immediately, resistance began to develop. The people of Alexandria had other plans for the site. METRO, the subway authority, didn't want to commit funds for a station that would be used only eight times a year. The citizens of the state did not want to float a bond issue to support the project.

Cooke and Wilder ignored the resistance and forged ahead with their plans. As they pushed, resistance increased in direct proportion to their actions, and within six months the project was dead.

Cleveland Indians

Since 1932, the Indians had played at Cleveland Municipal Stadium. In 1983, some people in the community proposed a new domed stadium so the team could move out of the cavernous old ball park on Lake Erie. Resistance to the new stadium was high. Community groups argued that the city should instead spend money on housing and community services. Politicians were split over the feasibility and cost. And some hardy souls simply preferred the old stadium with the wind whistling in off the lake.

The people who proposed the new stadium knew they needed to create a strong base of support for the project. They needed public approval for a bond issue as well as investment from the business community. They encountered resistance; but, instead of fighting, they

listened, discussed, and found ways of transforming the resistance into support.

For example, when they asked one influential community leader in Northeast Ohio for his support, he refused. He didn't care much for baseball and didn't want money to go into a new stadium. Without his support, they would have had great difficulty getting others to join in. Instead of attempting manipulation or use of power, they kept on listening. He told them what he did care about—economic development for downtown Cleveland.

The stadium planners found a way to merge what this community leader wanted with their plan for a new stadium. The project became more than just a new baseball stadium, it became an investment in revitalizing downtown Cleveland. In 1994, Gateway Center was completed. It houses Jacobs Field—the new baseball stadium; and also includes restaurants, a luxury hotel, and is the home to the basketball and hockey teams.

What a difference in results! And what a difference in the interaction between the leaders and resisters! Cooke and Wilder had secret meetings to plan the project and a surprise press conference to kick it off. They ignored the resisters and charged ahead. The Cleveland stadium group listened to those who opposed their ideas and found ways to turn resisters into supporters. For Cooke and Wilder, resisters were the enemy. For the Cleveland group, resisters were partners that helped create a better result.

Definitions

What is change? For our purposes here, change is simply something different that a leader initiates within an organization. The leader doesn't have to be the boss. Someone in HR could propose a new compensation program. Or someone in marketing could suggest a new product or market segment.

What is resistance? Sometimes ideas don't succeed because good judgment and rational analysis show them to be bad ideas that should be abandoned. Resistance is different. It is the protective, emotional reaction we all have when faced with an impending change. Resistance can take many forms, and it can mutate from one form to another; but to start with, there are two basic types: obvious and hidden.

Obvious Resistance

Open Criticism. Employees directly criticize the change, the timing of the initiative, and/or your qualifications for leading the change. It is as though they had an instant negative reaction to you and what you are proposing.

Denial. Sometimes, people put their heads in the sand and refuse to see that things are different and change is required. In his PBS series Healing and the Mind, Bill Moyers spoke with a cardiologist who refused to admit that he had a serious heart condition. For years he refused even to look at his electrocardiogram. Our desire to hide painful things from ourselves can be quite strong.

Silence. You deliver your presentation, and there is no reaction. It is as though the audience is made of stone. People are perhaps remembering what their mothers told them, "If you can't say anything good, don't say anything at all." You may not know exactly what has caused the resistance, but you can feel it is there.

Hidden Resistance

Endless Analysis. Not all questions mean resistance. Any change requires you to provide information and explanations. But after you have explained your idea and provided reasonable amounts of information, there are more and more questions: "Could you tell me again why we are doing this?" "How much will this cost?" "What are the best practices in the industry?" "What do people on the third shift think?" What tips you off that this is not just rational analysis is when you hear the same questions again and again or receive seemingly endless requests for details that are of marginal relevance.

Deflection. People keep changing the subject. Meetings flit from topic to topic. Just as you start to talk about something of substance, someone brings up another topic, and all attention shifts to it. This is a method people use, perhaps unconsciously, to hide from things they don't want to deal with.

Easy Agreement. Everyone agrees that the change needs to be made and that you have a good idea. You feel good, but a little while later, you realize that nothing is happening. No one is doing the things that need to be done to make the change happen. This can happen when people initially don't understand the level of commitment required from them. More frequently, it happens when the leader is intimidating and people are afraid to be critical or when there is a strong organizational norm that you better "get with the program."

Obvious resistance may seem to be a bigger threat than hidden resistance, but hidden resistance is actually tougher to deal with. With obvious resistance, you know right away that you're facing resistance; and many times you'll quickly be able to determine the reasons for the resistance. This gives you something to work with. Hidden resistance can be so subtle that you may not see it. And when you do catch on, you still may be unsure of the reasons why.

Whatever it is—I'm against it.
—Groucho Marx

What Causes Resistance?

Peter Block, in his book Flawless Consulting, says that fear is the emotion behind resistance—fear of loss of control or fear that the change will harm us. Fear isn't an emotion to which we easily admit, especially those of us who are men and especially in organizations. Instead of saying, "Boss, this new idea of yours makes me feel insecure and fearful." We say things like: "Why do we need a quality program? We already do high quality work." "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." And, "Here's another stupid program from those idiots at headquarters." Regardless of how

it is expressed, I believe Block is correct, that fear is at the root of resistance; and understanding resistance means understanding fear.

Fear is an emotion whose principle function is survival. Recent advances in technology have allowed neuroscientists to draw a detailed map of how fear works. Sensory signals come into the brain and are routed to the thalamus, which is a cluster of nerves responsible for sensory integration. The thalamus sends the signals along two paths. The larger and slower pathway goes to the neocortex, the area of the brain associated with rational thought. A smaller, quicker pathway transmits the signal to the amygdala and the hippocampus. These are parts of the limbic system, which is a donut shaped ring of cells that sits atop the brain stem. The amygdala and hippocampus together act as sentinels, watching the incoming signals and evaluating them as potential threats.

This evaluation isn't very sophisticated. Daniel Goleman, author of Emotional Intelligence, describes it as a single question: "Is this something that might hurt me?" If the answer is "yes," signals are immediately sent to other parts of the brain and body. We become alert, our attention is focused, memories relevant to the situation are brought to mind. If, after closer examination, the neocortex confirms that there is something that really could hurt us, a signal is sent back to the amygdala, which responds by quickly sending signals all over the brain and body to prepare us for fight or flight. It is at this point, with our hearts beating fast, a sinking feeling in our stomachs, and adrenaline pumping into our bloodstream, that we consciously feel afraid.

There are also times when the initial signal is so conclusive that the amygdala and hippocampus just go ahead and transmit the fear signals. For example, you're hiking in Alaska and a large grizzly bear rears up in front of you. In this situation, the full fear response happens directly without additional neocortical input. In fact, this type of fear response is so overwhelming, that rational thought is suspended until the danger subsides. This is good, because sometimes you just don't have time for analysis.

From Caves to the Office

Modern life has progressed to the point that we generally don't worry about large, carnivorous animals trying to eat us; but our neural circuitry, honed by millions of years of evolution, still functions the same. If we sense that something is going to hurt us, we feel fear; and we do the best we can to protect ourselves.

One thing that is guaranteed to produce an initial "This might hurt us!" signal from the amygdala and hippocampus is a change. Before organizations, when we lived in caves and trees, the change might have been a twig cracking in the forest or an unusual movement in the underbrush. Today the change might be the boss calling everyone together for an announcement. We become alert, focused on the details of the announcement, and we search our memory for relevant information. If, in your last job, you were laid off after the boss called everyone together for an announcement, your memory and reasoning will confirm that this is indeed something that could hurt you; and, as you walk to the meeting, you will feel afraid.

Our fears aren't always realistic. Fear errs on the side of being cautious—it's better to be scared and safe than it is to be fearless and dead. One small company president relates a story about making a change to his office coffee service. He didn't consult anyone; he just thought the new service was a better value. When a truck pulled up to take out the old coffee service, one employee quickly concluded that the company was going out of business. She communicated her fear to other employees, and the rumor spread like wild fire. The company president ended up spending five hours just trying to get the staff calmed down enough to go back to work.

On the other hand, anyone who was personally affected by the down sizings and right sizings and rationalizings of the 80's and early 90's knows that being on the receiving end of change can be brutally painful. In the end, it doesn't matter if the fear is realistic or not, because the employee's perception is what counts.

The Power of Resistance

Understanding fear helps us understand some things about resistance. First, because resistance is emotional in nature, reasoning and logic will have a limited impact. Just as you can't talk someone out of their fear of spiders, you can't talk someone out of their resistance. The harder you try, the more entrenched their resistance will become.

Second, resistance derives its power from fear, which is a very strong emotion. There are many well documented cases where fear provided the strength that allowed a person to do something that would normally be impossible for them. Compared to the power behind the usual change initiative, the potential power behind resistance is much greater.

Third, just as fear increases in direct proportion to the intensity of the threat, resistance increases in direct proportion to the pressure to change. The more you push for the change, the more the resistance will push back; and, as noted above, whatever power you can generate behind an initiative is very likely to be less than the power behind resistance.

Fourth, the switch that turns on the resistance is very fast and very sensitive. All sensory input is examined as a potential threat. It doesn't matter whether it is a new coffee service or a major reorganization.

As if all this weren't enough, there is another aspect of resistance which multiplies its ability to kill a change: Resisting requires less energy than initiating. Initiating a change requires action, but one can resist change by simply not doing anything. This means that resisters can last longer than leaders. Remember the Soviet Union? The government held all the power and owned everything, yet hidden resistance brought the government down, because the citizens did only enough to stay out of trouble. After a while nothing worked—factories, farms, transportation, the military—and finally the Union collapsed.

Suggestions for Leading Change

It is easy to see why so many change efforts fail. Resistance is a primal force of nature. You can't talk people out of it, you can't overpower it, and you can't sneak around it. What can be done?

First of all, the leader has to have a reasonably good idea for change, something compelling that is anchored in the necessities of his or her business and market. Occasionally, leaders are seduced by "hot" ideas: organizational renewal, business process redesign, corporate reinvention, service culture, TQM, six sigma, and the like. Unfortunately, in the normal wear and tear of organizational life, "hot" soon cools; and the energy behind the initiative evaporates.

Second, the leader needs to avoid doing things that heighten fear and thus increase the resistance. A few classic errors are listed below:

Sell Harder. You present your idea for change to your staff, but they don't like it. What do you do? Become more determined? Speak more forcefully? Disparage their objections? Any of these are natural reactions, but remember: the harder you push, the stronger their fear and the more stubborn the resistance.

Ignore the Resistance. This makes people scared and angry. Not only are you threatening them with a change, but you're also showing disrespect by not listening to them. Cooke and Wilder's fatal mistake was to ignore the resistance.

Attack the Resistors. Let it be known that anyone who doesn't get with the program is disloyal. Blow your stack at anyone who dares to challenge your idea. Fire those who won't support you. Attack may gain you a short term victory, but it also produces three serious long term problems. First, you will make people even more fearful. Second, you will change the resistance from something active that you can see and deal with into hidden resistance. On the surface it will look like agreement; but, underneath, there will be no commitment to action. Third, the employees who have the courage to stand up to you and express themselves will leave. They may be aggravating; but they are also very valuable employees, because, every now and then, they'll save you from making really stupid mistakes.

Manipulate. Put a positive spin on the initiative, play down the negatives and talk up the positives, make promises—even if you can't keep them—and reassure everyone that it won't be a problem. These tricks may work long enough to get started; but the change won't stick. As soon as people realize you are blowing smoke, you'll lose commitment and things will start coming unraveled. In addition, your level of trustworthiness will have dropped to zero; you will have taught your employees to be afraid, no matter what you have to say.

We have met the enemy and he is us.

—Pogo

It is easy to vow that you will never make mistakes like these. However, when it is your idea that is being criticized, anger and frustration normally follow. Once anger and frustration occur, the potential is high for making all kinds of fear-increasing mistakes. When this happens, step back from the situation, don't act on your emotions, and give the rational part of your brain a chance to regain control. A better strategy is to take preventative action by disconnecting your ego from your idea. From the start, regard it as only a rough draft that needs to be improved through criticism and discussion.

Finally, the leader should do things that reduce fear. This doesn't mean saying soothing things like, "Nobody will get hurt." We have all learned that such soothing words signal that something really bad is coming fast. Here are three suggestions that will give you a chance to survive the resistance.

Be Honest. One of the paradoxes of change is that the more you try to minimize fear by putting a positive spin on things, the more fearful people become. Through long exposure to advertisements and politicians, we have developed a keen sense of when we are being lied to. As one veteran of the change wars put it, "Why can't they just tell us the truth. Employees hate being lied to, and they hate knowing that their boss thinks they are stupid enough to believe the lies."

While it may seem a bit unsophisticated in an age of polished corporate communications and PR, the best practice is to tell the unvarnished truth. If you have to exaggerate anything, exaggerate the bad parts. Honesty helps accomplish three good things. First, it reduces the fear that you are hiding the bad news. Second, it sets an example that encourages others to be honest in return. And third, candor and the willingness to face up to problems are two of the most potent things you can do to create trust in your leadership.

Listen. If you have a great idea, the last thing you want is to hear what's wrong with it. But it has to be done. One reason is that fear levels decrease when people have a chance to be heard. Another reason is that, if people have objections on their mind, they won't be able to listen to you until they have expressed those objections. Finally, through active listening, you can get the information you need to deal with the resistance.

"Active" listening is required because people won't start out telling you what they are afraid of. Remember, fear prepares us for fight or flight. So the first things you will encounter are fight behaviors, such as open criticism, or flight behaviors, such as endless analysis or deflection. You'll need to probe to figure out what is really scaring people. Ask questions like: "Could you tell me a little more about that." (As opposed to: "What the hell do you mean by that?")

When you have a reasonable guess about what is causing the resistance, you need to

confirm that it is accurate. Peter Block calls this step "Naming the Resistance." Naming the resistance is stating openly what you think is causing the fear. It needs to be phrased in a neutral way that doesn't imply an attack, "What I'm hearing is that this new software is too complicated." Either this brings the cause of the fear into the open; or, if they say, "No, that's not it," you can continue the active listening process until you successfully name the resistance.

Interact. Once you have named the resistance, you can deal with it. In the Cleveland stadium example, the leaders first listened, identified the sources of resistance, and then interacted with the resisters to create new ideas that included some of what the resisters wanted. The interaction accomplished three things. First, it allowed the resisters to contribute, and the contribution effectively countered their fears of having no control. Second, the interaction enhanced the quality of the initiative. And third, the interaction turned the resisters into supporters; suddenly it was their idea too.

The Cleveland example is an obvious success, a "home run" so to speak. Realistically, the interaction can lead anywhere. Sometimes it will clarify that the two sides have opposite goals. In this case, you'll either have to give up on the idea, or get ready to do battle. Sometimes it will show you that your idea is flawed, and that it is best to head back to the drawing board. Such outcomes may not be what you wanted, but at least the knowledge gained from the interaction lets you make a better decision about where to spend your time and energy.

Initiating change requires good ideas, creativity, courage, and strong interpersonal skills; and even if you meet all these requirements, there is no guarantee of success. As attractive as the fantasy is, there are no leadership techniques that will allow you to successfully impose change on others. No matter how brilliant or smooth you are, you will encounter resistance. And no matter how powerful and tenacious you are, resistance can become even more powerful and tenacious. The best any leader can do is to be honest, avoid doing things that make the resistance worse, and genuinely work, as an equal partner with those who resist the change, to build an idea that is good enough to earn everyone's support.

No one can persuade another to change. Each of us guards a gate of change that can only be opened from the inside. We can not open the gate of another either by argument or by emotional appeal.

—Marilyn Ferguson