

## RESISTANCE TO CHANGE: THE REST OF THE STORY

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Prevailing views of resistance to change tell a one-sided story that favors change agents by proposing that resistance is an irrational and dysfunctional reaction located "over there" in change recipients. We tell the rest of the story by proposing that change agents contribute to the occurrence of resistance through their own actions and inactions and that resistance can be a resource for change. We conclude by proposing how resistance might be restructured.

It is time to expand our understanding of resistance to change, including its sources and its potential contribution to effective change management. As others have noted (Dent & Goldberg, 1999a; King & Anderson, 1995; Meston & King, 1996), the predominant perspective on resistance is decidedly one sided, in favor of change agents and their sponsors.<sup>1</sup> Studies of change appear to take the perspective, or bias, of those seeking to bring about change, in which it is presumed change agents are doing the right and proper things while change recipients throw up unreasonable obstacles or barriers intent on "doing in" or "screwing up" the change (Dent & Goldberg, 1999a; Klein, 1976). Accordingly, change agents are portrayed as undeserving victims of the irrational and dysfunctional responses of change recipients.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of exposition, we use the term *change agent* to refer to those who are responsible for identifying the need for change, creating a vision and specifying a desired outcome, and then making it happen. They are the people responsible for the formulation and implementation of the change and include what Kanter, Stein, and Jick (1992) call "change strategists and implementers." Change agents, therefore, include those engaged in the actual conduct of the change, as well as those who call for and sponsor it. We use the term *change recipients* to represent those people who are responsible for implementing, adopting, or adapting to the change(s) (Kanter et al., 1992).

This "change agent-centric" view presumes that resistance is an accurate report by unbiased observers (change agents) of an objective reality (resistance by change recipients). Change agents are not portrayed as participants who enact their environments (Weick, 1979) or construct their realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) but, rather, as people who deal with and address the objectively real resistance of change recipients. There is no consideration given to the possibility that resistance is an interpretation assigned by change agents to the behaviors and communications of change recipients, or that these interpretations are either self-serving or self-fulfilling.

Nor, for that matter, does the change agent-centric view consider the possibility that change agents contribute to the occurrence of what they call "resistant behaviors and communications" through their own actions and inactions, owing to their own ignorance, incompetence, or mismanagement (e.g., Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990; Kanter et al., 1992; Schaffer & Thompson, 1992; Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996). Rather, resistance is portrayed as an unwarranted and detrimental response residing completely "over there, in them" (the change recipients) and arising spontaneously as a reaction to change, independent of the interactions and relationships between the change agents and recipients (Dent & Goldberg, 1999a; Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002; King & Anderson, 1995).

Resistance to organization change is never portrayed as the product of rationally coherent strategies and objectives (Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994), even though resistance to persuasion has been found to be the product of thoughtful consideration (e.g., Knowles & Linn, 2004b; Wegener, Petty, Smoak, & Fabrigar, 2004). Nor is resistance to change viewed as a potential contributor to or resource for effective change, despite the fact that authentic dissent has been shown to be functional in other areas of management (Nemeth, Brown, & Rogers, 2001; Nemeth, Connell, Rogers, & Brown, 2001; Schulz-Hardt, Jochims, & Frey, 2002). As a result, we have a one-sided view of resistance that is treated as received truth, even though this view is both theoretically and practically limited, overly simplistic, and perhaps even misguided (Dent & Goldberg, 1999b; Jermier et al., 1994; King & Anderson, 1995).

Given these limitations, we think it is time to expand the resistance story in three ways: first, by considering resistance as a self-serving and potentially self-fulfilling label, given by change agents attempting to make sense of change recipients' reactions to change initiatives, rather than a literal description of an objective reality; second, by examining the ways in which change agents contribute to the occurrence of the very reactions they label as resistance through their own actions and inactions, such as the breach of agreements and failure to restore trust (Cobb, Wooten, & Folger, 1995; Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004), which implies that resistance is neither a sudden nor a direct response to a particular instance of change but, rather, a function of the quality of the relationship between agents and recipients in which change agents are and have been active participants and contributors; and, third, by considering that there are circumstances under which what agents call resistance can be a positive contribution to change (e.g., Knowles & Linn, 2004c). By assuming that resistance is necessarily bad, change agents have missed its potential contributions of increasing the likelihood of successful implementation, helping build awareness and momentum for change, and eliminating unnecessary, impractical, or counterproductive elements in the design or conduct of the change process.

We are not the first to reexamine resistance or its role in organizational change. Others have

questioned its continued usefulness (Dent & Goldberg, 1999a; King & Anderson, 1995), proposed conceptual reformulations (e.g., Piderit, 2000), or challenged its theoretical underpinnings (Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996; Latour, 1986). Although each has opened new avenues for examination, we see a consistent failure of researchers to explicitly consider the contribution of change agents to resistance and the implications of that contribution for the role of resistance in change. The intent of this article is to begin addressing this failure.

### RESISTANCE AS CHANGE AGENT SENSEMAKING

Current approaches to change tend to treat change agents like the umpire who asserts, "I call them [balls and strikes] as they are" (Weick, 1979)—that is, assuming they are mirroring a reality in which resistance is a report on objective phenomena that exist independent of them. This assumption ignores that change presents both agents and recipients with potential problems that are an occasion and trigger for sensemaking (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994; Weick, 1995). Problems are not givens; they are constructed from novel, discrepant, or problematic situations that are puzzling, troubling, or uncertain to participants (Weick, 1995). Change is a situation that interrupts normal patterns of organization and calls for participants to enact new patterns, involving an interplay of deliberate and emergent processes that can be highly ambiguous (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). In these circumstances both change agents and change recipients engage in sensemaking: change agents try to determine "How will this get accomplished?" and change recipients try to determine "What will happen to me?" (Gioia et al., 1994).

Sensemaking is an active process that involves the interaction of information seeking, meaning ascription, and associated responses (Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993). It includes extracting particular behaviors and communications out of streams of ongoing events (i.e., bracketing), interpreting them to give them meaning, and then acting on the resulting interpretation. In the process, events and meanings become commingled, resulting in what Bohm (1996) terms a *net presentation*, in which events and meanings are treated as a single, seamless

reality (see also Goss, 1996, and Watzlawick, 1990). Change agents take actions consistent with the net presentation, reifying and objectifying it as if it exists independent of them and as if they had nothing to do with its creation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Sensemaking, by including authoring and creation as well as discovery, implies a higher level of change agent involvement than simply reporting or interpretation (Gioia et al., 1994; Weick, 1995).

### Expectation Effects

Expectations, such as those found in self-fulfilling prophecies and the Pygmalion effect, can have a significant impact on change agent sensemaking, particularly bracketing (Eden, 1984, 1988; Madon, Jussim, & Eccles, 1997; Watzlawick, 1984). A self-fulfilling prophecy begins with a person's belief, false at the time, that a certain event will happen in the future. The person holding the belief then behaves as if the event is an inevitable occurrence, making sense of the actions and communications of others in such a way as to confirm the prophecy. In so doing, he or she enacts a world that appears as an insightful awareness of reality, rather than a product of his or her own authorship (Weick, 1979). Accordingly, research shows that expectations regarding the ability and potential of others affect the assessments of their performance and subsequent treatment by authority figures—for example, teachers and leaders (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Eden, 1988; Eden & Shani, 1982).

The work on self-fulfilling prophecies and the Pygmalion effect suggests that if change agents go into a change expecting resistance, they are likely to find it (Kanter et al., 1992). As Winslow points out:

Someone holding the hypothesis of, or actually believing in, resistance to change, will plan on resistance, will plot ways to minimize it, will be tempted to disguise or hide the change, will keep it a secret, in short take any and all actions to overcome this assumed resistance, which then, surprise, surprise, leads to the appearance of the very phenomenon that was hoped to be avoided (quoted in Dent & Goldberg, 1999a: 38).

Expectations, by shaping the very phenomenon to which change agents are paying attention, predispose change agents to look for and find resistance, thereby confirming its existence, val-

idating their expectations, and sustaining the received truth that people resist change.

### A Self-Serving Account

Sensemaking occurs in conversations that involve giving accounts or self-justifying explanations of events and activities. Scott and Lyman (1968) defined an account as a linguistic device employed when action is subject to evaluation, particularly when there is a gap between action and expectation or between promise and performance. A form of defensive speaking (Schutz & Baumeister, 1999), an account's purpose is to explain unexpected or untoward behaviors or outcomes in a way that will help the speaker maintain a favorable relationship with the audience hearing the account. If change agents are expected to mobilize action and fail to do so, an account for the failure is warranted (Eccles, Nohria, & Berley, 1992).

But not just any account will suffice. Whether an audience accepts an account depends on the shared background expectancies and understandings of the interactants. Accounts that appeal to what "everyone knows" have a higher likelihood of being accepted (Scott & Lyman, 1968). As a received truth, resistance meets this standard, making it a readily acceptable account. This means that change agents' accounts of unexpected problems in a change process can safely attribute those problems to resistance as a way to divert attention from other factors, including their own failings (Meston & King, 1996). Change agents are thereby encouraged to engage in sensemaking that entails scapegoating and sloughing off responsibility by blaming difficulties on resistance.

The literature on self-serving attributions and bias is replete with examples of decision makers at all levels giving accounts that shift blame and make them look good (e.g., Bettman & Weitz, 1983; Ford, 1985; Kelley, 1973; Salancik & Meindl, 1984). Unless we are willing to assume that change agents are immune to these same attributional tendencies, it is reasonable to expect them to give accounts in which they take credit for successful changes and blame other factors, such as resistance, for problems and failures.

Giving accounts for the problems associated with change, therefore, is a matter of making sense of failures, setbacks, or complaints for an interested audience. As such, invoking "resis-

tance to change" as the source of these problems is both individually and collectively self-serving for change agents, because it sustains standardized terminology and beliefs within the community of change agents, validates the fundamental tenet that people resist change, and absolves or mitigates agent responsibility for the unexpected negative aspects of change. By locating resistance "over there, in them" (i.e., change recipients), rather than treating it as the interactive systemic phenomenon envisioned by Lewin (1952), change agents shift responsibility for resistance from things under their control (i.e., systemic factors) to the characteristics and attributes of recipients (Caruth, Middlebrook, & Rachel, 1985; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; O'Toole, 1995). In this way the generic explanation of resistance serves to conceal the specific behaviors and communications of both agents and recipients that lie behind it. For these reasons, we should not be surprised that recommended strategies for dealing with resistance focus on doing things to or for change recipients, while saying little or nothing about the actions of change agents (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979).

### CHANGE AGENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO RESISTANCE

The contribution of change agents to resistance goes beyond the labeling that results from their own sensemaking to breaking agreements and violating trust, misrepresentation and other communication breakdowns, and their own resistance to change.

#### Broken Agreements and the Violation of Trust

Change agents contribute to recipient reactions by breaking agreements both before and during change and by failing to restore the subsequent loss of trust (Andersson, 1996; Cobb et al., 1995; Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997). Agreements, including psychological and implied contracts (Rousseau, 1995, 1996, 1998), are broken or breached whenever agents of the organization knowingly or unknowingly renege on a promise or an understood and expected pattern of cooperation (Axelrod, 1984; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1989). Breaches occur when there are changes in the distribution and allocation of resources, the processes and procedures by which those reallocations are made,

or the ways in which people of greater authority interact with those of lesser authority (Shapiro & Kirkman, 1999).

Research on organizational justice has shown that when people see themselves as being or having been treated fairly, they develop attitudes and behaviors associated with successful change (Cobb et al., 1995). However, when people experience an injustice or betrayal, they report resentment, a sense of being done to, and a desire for retribution (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999), which can result in such negative behaviors as stealing, lower productivity, lower work quality, and less cooperation (Shapiro & Kirkman, 1999), along with the loss of trust of, obligation toward, and satisfaction with their employer (Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). In extreme cases, people may seek revenge or retaliation and engage in sabotage, theft, or other aggressive or violent behavior (Benisom, 1994; Robinson & Bennett, 1997; Tripp & Bies, 1997), believing that such actions are justifiable ways to "get even" for perceived mistreatment and to balance a perceived injustice.

Many of the responses to injustice have also been labeled as forms of resistance (Caruth et al., 1985; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; O'Toole, 1995), suggesting that resistance may be the result of perceived injustice and broken agreements. Our own speculation is that this result may be particularly evident in cases of transformational change, where there is a greater likelihood that existing agreements will be broken and replaced with fundamentally different ones (Rousseau, 1996), eroding recipient trust and agent credibility. Nevertheless, victims of broken agreements are willing to reconcile and repair a relationship if the offender offers a sincere, formal, and timely apology that clearly admits personal culpability (Tomlinson et al., 2004).

This line of research suggests that change agents who repair damaged relationships and restore trust both before and during change are less likely to encounter resistance than agents who do not. Moreover, since past broken agreements have been found to have a negative effect on victims' expectations of future violations (Shapiro & Kirkman, 1999; Tomlinson et al., 2004), agents who fail to bring about closure (Albert, 1983, 1984; Albert & Kessler, 1976) are more likely to encounter actions they will label resistance

not only in later phases of current changes but in subsequent changes as well (Duck, 2001; Knowles & Linn, 2004b). In this respect, research shows that failing to repair damaged relationships and restore trust leads to other responses that will be labeled resistance: cynicism, a tendency to engage in disparaging and critical behaviors toward both change and change agents, and lower work motivation and commitment (Andersson, 1996; Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998; Reichers et al., 1997).

### Communication Breakdowns

Change agents can also contribute to the occurrence of resistance through communication breakdowns, such as failing to legitimize change, misrepresenting its chances of success, and failing to call people to action.

**Failure to legitimize change.** Traditional perspectives on diffusion contend that adoption is driven by the merits of the innovation and/or characteristics of adopters, rather than the discursive practices of change agents (Green, 2004). In this respect, diffusion is treated as an object-like phenomenon that moves in the same way physical objects move and is slowed by contact with recipients (Latour, 1986). But innovations and changes are not objects; they are conversations, discourses, and texts (Barrett, Thomas, & Hocevar, 1995; Boje, 1995; Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996; Fairclough, 1992; Ford, 1999), the merits of which are seldom self-evident. Change agents, therefore, must provide discursive justifications that establish the appropriateness and rationality of change adoption, create readiness for change, and increase not only the likelihood of recipient acceptance and participation in the change but also the speed and extent of that acceptance (Amenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993; Green, 2004; Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999).

Recipient acceptance of and participation in the initial stages of a change has been shown to depend on recipients' assessment of its instrumentality—that is, the likelihood the change will lead to personal and organizational benefits (Kim & Rousseau, 2006). Because the valuation of a change's instrumentality requires considerable information processing and cognitive effort (Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Withey & Cooper, 1989), recipients give greater scrutiny to proposed changes by questioning, evaluating, and countering the elements of supporting argu-

ments in order to identify strengths and weaknesses (Knowles & Linn, 2004b). As a result, strong, well-developed supporting justifications tend to be accepted and weak ones rejected. By dismissing this scrutiny as resistance, change agents not only miss the opportunity to provide compelling justifications that help recipients make the cognitive reassessments required to support change but also increase the risk of inoculating recipients against future change (Knowles & Linn, 2004b).

According to McGuire's theory of inoculation, change recipients' success in resisting influence is determined by their ability to refute arguments that challenge their prevailing beliefs (McGuire, 1964; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961). Developing counterarguments builds a stronger defense of and rationale for their current perspectives, thereby serving as a form of inoculation against future challenges (Tormala & Petty, 2004). Inoculation theory suggests that change agents who do not develop and provide compelling justifications that overcome the potential or prevailing counterarguments, or who fail to demonstrate the validity of those justifications, end up inoculating recipients and increasing their immunity to change. Inoculation theory has been used successfully in increasing college student resistance to credit card advertisements (Compton & Pfau, 2004), preventing the erosion of public attitudes toward an organization following a crisis (Wan & Pfau, 2004), and increasing the resistance of supporters of political candidates to attack messages from opposing candidates (Pfau & Burgoon, 1988).

Finally, although Piderit (2000) has suggested that ambivalence may be helpful during change, Larson and Tompkins (2005) have found that change agents undermine the power of their justifications for and the legitimacy of a change by being ambivalent. Using the rhetoric of the new while engaging in the practices of the old, or advocating the value of the new while praising the success of the old, sends an inconsistent message to change recipients, making it easier for them to invoke the discourses of the successful past to counter arguments that change is really needed. Through their ambivalence, agents give recipients greater certainty and confidence in what arguments to use while undermining their own ability to effectively counter those arguments when they are em-

ployed (Quereshi & Strauss, 1980; Tormala & Petty, 2004).

**Misrepresentation.** Change agents may engage in intentional misrepresentation to induce recipients' participation, to look good, or to avoid losing face and looking bad (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, & Wyer, 1996). Deception and misrepresentation are bargaining tactics that may be used during negotiations and are more likely to occur in competitive situations where the stakes (e.g., reputations and careers) are high and there are incentives (e.g., "winning") for unethical behavior (Hegarty & Sims, 1978; Tenbrunsel, 1998). Tenbrunsel (1998), for example, found that in competitive situations an expectation of unethical behavior by one party promotes a type of defensive ethics whereby the other party responds with his or her own unethical behavior in order to protect him/herself and avoid being seen as a sucker. This suggests that where change is seen in a competitive context, such as when agents believe recipients have engaged in deceptive behavior during previous changes or expect they will this time in order to get some type of concession, agents may misrepresent the costs, benefits, or likely success of the change.

Not all misrepresentations of change, however, are intentional. Since decision makers have a bias toward optimism (Lovallo & Kahneman, 2003), change agent optimism may be genuine and not intended to be either deceptive or misleading. As a result of their optimism, agents may oversell the positive and undersell the negative. Nevertheless, as change unfolds and recipients compare actual results to the original promises and projections, unfavorable deviations can result in perceptions of misrepresentation, injustice, and violations of trust (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Tomlinson et al., 2004) that undermine agent credibility and add to recipient anticipation of future inconsistencies (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999).

As a practical matter, change agents are encouraged to communicate frequently and enthusiastically about change (Lewis, Schmisser, Stephens, & Weir, 2006). Yet, in doing so, they run the risk of being seen as misrepresenting the change. Agents can reduce the chances of such accusations by being as truthful, realistic, and accurate in their depiction of the change as possible, including revealing what they do not know. Schweigger and DeNisi (1991), for exam-

ple, found that a realistic merger preview—a complete and authentic explanation of both the positive and negative outcomes of a merger—reduced the uncertainty change recipients had about change and increased their ability to cope with it. Realistic previews have also been shown to be effective in other settings (Wanous, 1992).

**No call for action.** Discursive justifications and realistic representations of change are necessary to the perceived legitimacy and credibility of change and change agents, but they are not sufficient for producing action. Change is fundamentally about mobilizing action, and although talk is essential, not all talk leads to action (Eccles et al., 1992; Ford & Ford, 1995; Winograd & Flores, 1987). Of the four conversations involved in the conduct of change, only conversations for performance are specifically designed to elicit action (Ford & Ford, 1995).

When change agents mistakenly assume that understanding is, or should be, sufficient to produce action, they are likely to emphasize conversations for understanding over conversations for performance and are, as a consequence, likely to see little or no action (Beer et al., 1990; Ford & Ford, 1995). Ashkenas and Jick (1992), for example, found, in their study of General Electric's Work-Out Program, that without conversations for performance, people naively assumed that recipient understanding and acceptance would lead to action. If change agents make this assumption, they may inappropriately attribute the lack of action to resistance rather than to a failure to use an appropriate mix of conversations, particularly conversations for performance.

### Resisting Resistance

By assuming that only change recipients resist change, proponents of traditional approaches ignore the possibility that change agents may be resistant to the ideas, proposals, and counteroffers submitted by change recipients. Research on procedural and interactional justice (Folger et al., 1999; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998) indicates that if change agents fail to treat the communications of change recipients as genuine and legitimate, or as extensions and translations of the change, they may be seen as resistant (e.g., "defensive," "unreceptive," or "their mind is made up") by

change recipients. Change agent defensiveness may also be more likely when recipient reactions indicate that more effort will be required to accomplish the change than was originally planned or that there will be undesirable budget or other performance impacts, or when the change agent has career consequences associated with the success of the change (King & Anderson, 1995). The cost of this defensiveness is the persistence of resistance and its escalation in a vicious cycle, in which resistance begets resistance (Powell & Posner, 1978).

One way in which agents resist resistance is to not talk about it in the mistaken belief that to acknowledge something is to give it power and credence. However, Tomala and Petty (2004) point out that not talking about or acknowledging resistance may actually exacerbate it. Building on the approach-avoidance theory of persuasion, they contend that a persuasive message raises both accepting consideration and counteractive resistance and that acknowledging resistance, labeling it as such, and overtly identifying its role in change have the paradoxical effect of defusing its power.

### RESISTANCE AS A RESOURCE

Change recipients' reactions to change are not necessarily dysfunctional obstacles or liabilities to successful change. On the contrary, recipient reactions can have value for the existence, engagement, and strength of a change, serving as an asset and a resource in its implementation and successful accomplishment (Knowles & Linn, 2004b).

#### Existence Value of Resistance

Organizational change entails introducing new conversations and shifting existing conversations and patterns of discourse (Barrett et al., 1995; Czarniawska, 1997; Fairclough, 1992; Ford, 1999). But new conversations have difficulty competing with already existing conversations that are well practiced and habituated, not because the new conversations are without value but because they suffer from the liabilities of newness, inexperience, and unfamiliarity (Barrett et al., 1995; Kanter, 1989, 2001, 2002). Add to this that conversations are ephemeral, disappearing when they are not being spoken (Berquist, 1993), and it becomes evident that one

challenge for change agents is getting new conversations heard—and ultimately spoken—in enough places, often enough, and long enough that they catch on and take root (Barrett et al., 1995). This is where resistance can be of value.

Resistance helps keep conversations in existence, as evidenced by the following example from a pharmaceutical company introducing a new product:

Using [the] data was very strong, something like "shock therapy," but it gave us the opportunity to get our foot in the door. We wanted as many people as possible talking about the issue; we wanted to create a debate. In the beginning, we weren't concerned whether people were talking in a positive or even a negative way, because either way, it was bringing attention to our issue (*Reputation Management*, 1999: 59).

Although talking in a negative way—for example, complaining and criticizing—has been labeled as resistance (Caruth et al., 1985), it can nevertheless be functional because it keeps the topic "in play"—that is, in existence—giving others an opportunity to participate in the conversation. Barrett et al. (1995) found that criticism of the introduction of total quality leadership helped keep the conversation active, gave agents an opportunity to clarify and further legitimize the change, and gave recipients an opportunity to create translations and understandings that contributed to their subsequent acceptance and expansion of the change.

Rather than being an obstacle or detriment to successful change, therefore, resistance paradoxically may be a critical factor in its ultimate success. In fact, the ephemeral nature of conversations, when combined with the principles of extinction in verbal behavior (Skinner, 1991), leads us to speculate that if people want a change to die (i.e., go out of existence), they would be better off not talking about it than engaging in existence-giving "resistance" communications that provide energy and further its translation and diffusion (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996).

#### Engagement Value of Resistance

Resistance is one possible form of engagement with change (acceptance and ambivalence being others [Piderit, 2000]) and may, in some cases, reflect a higher level of commitment than acceptance, because some resistance is

thoughtful. Treating resistance as "irrational" presumes that it violates normative standards of decision making by being the result of an unthoughtful, unconsidered, and uninformed choice between acceptance/compliance and resistance (Brunsson, 1986). However, as in the case of attitude change, there are thoughtful as well as nonthoughtful mechanisms for both acceptance and resistance (Wegener et al., 2004).

Attitudes based on high levels of information processing (i.e., thoughtful attitudes), on the one hand, are more likely to generate scrutiny and well-considered counterarguments and, thus, to be less susceptible to persuasion than attitudes based on lower levels (Wegener et al., 2004). As a result, changes in these attitudes represent a significant "win" (conversion) for change agents that can give them highly committed and motivated partners over the duration of change (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003; Kotter, 1995). Unthoughtful acceptance, on the other hand, although it provides immediate agreement and support, can erode as change progresses, undermining its long-term viability (Duck, 2001).

Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) proposes that people resist externally imposed changes that threaten freedoms important to them, indicating a potentially higher level of psychological involvement and commitment among people who are demonstrating "resistance" than those appearing to accept the changes. Change recipients who are highly committed to the success of the organization but who disagree with a proposed change because it threatens something of value to them may engage in the change process by expressing their concerns. Such expressions are particularly likely from recipients who are high in organizational identity and psychological ownership (Dirks, Cummings, & Pierce, 1996; Eccles et al., 1992). Where recipients have a stake in what happens to "their" organization, process, or group, they may raise objections or questions or may engage in other "resistive" behaviors as a function of an authentic commitment to and concern for the organization's viability or success.

Resistance can also be used to engage people in change through paradoxical interventions (Tormala & Petty, 2004; Watzlawick, 1990) in which agents specify a target for the resistance, thereby constraining, controlling, and using the energies of resistance to help promote a given change. Quite literally, change agents instruct

change recipients not to engage in the very thing that is wanted. For example, insomniacs may be advised to stay awake, or dieters to stop dieting. By resisting the instruction, change recipients move in the direction of the desired outcome—sleep and weight loss. Kavanagh (2004) has contended that the development of open source software was the result of a paradoxical intervention in which software developers were told not to develop such software.

In physics, resistance is understood as an inevitable consequence of motion (except in a vacuum), with the magnitude of resistance providing feedback on the mechanism's design. Change agents can similarly use resistance as feedback on recipient engagement by listening keenly to comments, complaints, and criticisms for cues to adjust the pace, scope, or sequencing of change and/or its implementation. Thus, rather than dismissing recipient scrutiny as irrational and acceptance as rational, change agents can use resistance as an indicator of recipient engagement and a valuable source of feedback for improving the process and conduct of change (Amason, 1996; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989). In fact, agents may want to consider the absence of resistance as a sign of disengagement and a harbinger of future problems resulting from unthinking acceptance (Wegener et al., 2004).

### Strengthening Value of Resistance

Resistance is a form of conflict. And since conflict has been found to strengthen and improve not only the quality of decisions but also participants' commitments to the implementation of those decisions (Amason, 1996), it stands to reason that resistance can provide a similar strengthening value during change. This is particularly likely where resistance is authentic rather than contrived or artificially generated through the use of such strategies as dialectical inquiry or devil's advocacy (Nemeth, Brown, & Rogers, 2001; Nemeth, Connell, Rogers, & Brown, 2001; Schulz-Hardt et al., 2002).

The difficulty, however, is that both functional (e.g., task) and dysfunctional (e.g., emotional) conflict can occur simultaneously, and since emotional conflict is highly contagious (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994), it has the potential to overshadow or dominate task conflict. Moreover, any significant level of conflict—task

or emotional—can be detrimental (DeDreu & Weingart, 2003), negatively impacting participants' experience and lessening their acceptance of and support for the implementation of change (Schweiger et al., 1989). It is understandable, therefore, that change agents might consider any resistance dysfunctional. Nevertheless, by treating resistance as dysfunctional conflict, change agents lose the potential strengthening value that functional conflict can contribute to the change and its implementation.

Treating resistance as dysfunctional also ignores much of the classic work on attitude change that focuses on ways to strengthen, rather than weaken, the resistance properties of attitudes (Wegener et al., 2004). In a world with absolutely no resistance, no change would stick, and recipients would completely accept the advocacy of all messages received, including those detrimental to the organization. Conflict is one of the ways used to help inoculate and immunize people against subsequent change, including backsliding (McGuire, 1964). One possible outcome of resistance, then, is a potentially stronger commitment to the change on the part of recipients.

Emotional conflict is not necessarily related to present change proposals or conditions. Rather, it may be a function of unresolved issues from previous changes (Reichers et al., 1997). For this reason it can indicate that some organizational housekeeping is required, such as restoring trust. If this need is recognized and addressed, it can provide the opportunity for agents to strengthen their relationships with recipients (Tomlinson et al., 2004).

Finally, the mere threat or anticipation of resistance can encourage change agents to adopt some of the management practices known to reduce resistance and strengthen change. These practices include communicating extensively, inviting people to participate, providing people with needed resources, and developing strong working relationships (Caruth et al., 1985; Kotter, 1995; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Kouzes & Posner, 1993). Where these management practices have fallen by the wayside, a good dose of resistance (or the fear of it) may be exactly the reminder needed to have change agents alter their practices.

## RECONSTRUCTING RESISTANCE

Dent and Goldberg (1999a) have argued that part of the reason for the current and limiting assumptions about resistance is that the concept has been pared down since its origin. Initially envisioned as a systemic phenomenon (Lewin, 1952), resistance has come to be seen largely as a psychological phenomenon located "over there" in change recipients. This paring down has reduced the need to develop new tools to improve success rates for organizational change and has left change agents with only one path to take: refine ways to show recipients the "errors of their ways" by dealing with the misunderstandings, fears, and apprehensions believed to underlie their resistance. There are few tools, for example, that help change agents (1) repair damaged trust resulting from broken agreements (Tomlinson et al., 2004), (2) address and resolve issues of mistreatment or injustice (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999), (3) admit mistakes or take other actions that restore credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 1993; Reichers et al., 1997), or (4) complete and bring closure to the past (Albert, 1983; Ford et al., 2002).

In the face of such paring down from systemic to psychological phenomena, it might be easy to propose, as others have (e.g., Dent & Goldberg, 1999a; Piderit, 2000), that the concept of resistance to change may have lost its value and should be abandoned. This is not, however, the course of action advocated here. Rather, we see an opportunity to reconstruct resistance by expanding it to include the contributory role of change agents and, thus, of the agent-recipient relationship.

A reconstruction of resistance based on the arguments presented here implies that what is currently considered "resistance to change" can be more appropriately understood as a dynamic among three elements. One element is "recipient action," which is any behavior or communication that occurs in response to a change initiative and its implementation. This element has been the primary focus of the extant resistance literature. The second element is "agent sense-making," including agents' interpretations of and meanings given to actual or anticipated recipient actions as well as the actions agents take as a function of their own interpretations and meanings. Although agents' responses to their interpretation of resistance have been con-

sidered as strategies for overcoming resistance (e.g., Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979), their sensemaking has not. The third element is the "agent-recipient relationship" that provides the context in which the first two elements occur and that shapes, and is shaped by, agent-recipient interactions. Each of these elements has implications for the reconstruction of resistance.

### Recipient Resistance Is Public

The first implication of this reconstruction is that resistance can be restored from a psychological to a systemic phenomenon by shifting attention from the "private" or "internal" resistance of recipients to the public behaviors, conversations, and observable activities that constitute the interactions between agents and recipients. This is not to say that recipients cannot and do not have a variety of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward changes or those who sponsor them; clearly, they do (Piderit, 2000). Approach-avoidance theory (Knowles & Linn, 2004a) tells us that people can be simultaneously for (approach) and against (avoid) change. In this regard, research shows that people who voluntarily undertake to quit smoking still have strong positive and negative beliefs and feelings about doing so (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996), and people with high-quality employment relationships have both positive and negative views toward change (Kim & Rousseau, 2006).

By saying that resistance is public, we mean that observable recipient actions are the triggers for agent sensemaking, and it is these actions that are the basis for the label *resistance*. Accordingly, it is possible for recipients to be internally positive toward a change while simultaneously taking actions or delivering communications that change agents call resistance. It also possible for recipients to be internally ambivalent, or even negative, while taking actions that agents do not call resistance. Agents, of course, may make sense of these actions by attributing them to unseen but hypothesized private or internal motivations, which they then seek to redress through various resistance-reducing strategies (Knowles & Linn, 2004b).

When we agree to deal with resistance in terms of publicly observable phenomena, we do not need to hypothesize recipient feelings of injustice, betrayal, and violations of trust. Rather, we can overtly inquire about such perceptions

directly and, thus, bring old hurts, angers, or assumptions out of the hidden background and into the light of a dialogue for closure, resolution, or inclusion in agent sensemaking (Isaacs, 1993). In this way, what is labeled resistance (and its assumed causes) becomes an observable transaction "in between" agents and recipients and not a purely conjectured phenomenon residing "over there" in the recipients of change.

### Agent Sensemaking Is Determinant

A second implication of this reconstruction is that there is no resistance to change existing as an independent phenomenon apart from change agent sensemaking. This does not mean that recipients don't have reactions to change, nor does it mean that their actions can't have an adverse impact on change; they can and they do. What it does mean, however, is that none of these actions/reactions are, in and of themselves, resistance, and they do not become resistance unless and until change agents assign the label *resistance* to them as part of their sensemaking. When agents can include their own sensemaking in the diagnosis of resistance, their orientations, logics, and assumptions can be brought into the conversation for change and resistance to change.

When agents are included in the resistance dialogue, the interesting question is no longer "Why do recipients resist change?" but "Why do agents call some actions resistance and not others?" This question puts the agent squarely in the equation for resistance and asks us to consider why almost every observable phenomenon of change, from a smirk or a glassy look of inattention to insubordination or sabotage, has been called resistance (Caruth et al., 1985; Knowles & Linn, 2004b). Indeed, some have concluded that almost any recipient response can be labeled resistance (Meston & Kings, 1996).

This question is even more interesting when it is recognized that actions labeled resistance by agents are not perceived as such by those engaged in them (Eccles et al., 1992; Kelman & Warwick, 1973). Young (2000), for example, found that managers labeled resistant by change agents actually saw their actions to be supporting, not undermining, the organization's goals. Similarly, King and Anderson (1995) have contended that actions perceived by agents as harmful and warranting dismissal may be per-

ceived by others as morally justified or heroic behavior worthy of praise.

If sensemaking leads to assigning "resistance" to virtually any recipient action agents find to be suspicious, distasteful, or disagreeable, then not only does the term lose its discriminatory power but it raises questions concerning the basis for agents making such assignments. Morrison and Robinson (1997) suggest one reason agents may label recipient actions as resistance is because they feel the actions constitute a failure by recipients to honor and fulfill their psychological contracts. If this is the case, agents may label some actions resistance not because the actions are necessarily harmful to the change but because the agents consider them contrary to what should be done, what's right, or what's appropriate.

Another agent motivation for labeling behavior as resistance stems from the challenge of separating "background resistance" in an organization from the special factors that need to be addressed in order for a change to be successful. There may be a variety of actions in an organization, such as foot dragging, failing to follow procedures, being late for or missing meetings, complaining, gossiping, failing to perform, and so forth, that are endemic, albeit in varying degrees, in all organizations. These normal, everyday actions are a function of many factors, such as leadership style, reward systems, group dynamics, and interpersonal conflicts, and not necessarily related to a specific change. Still, these everyday actions are cited as evidence of resistance to change (e.g., Caruth et al., 1985; O'Toole, 1995).

Because change is often associated with greater urgency, pressure, and risk than normal organization activities (Kotter, 1995), agents may be less tolerant of and more frustrated by actions habitually displayed by recipients. Labeling these actions resistance provides agents a readily accepted justification for operating in different and potentially more aggressive ways, thereby signaling that the game has changed and that certain behaviors will no longer be tolerated, at least during the change. If this is the case, then agents may assign "resistance" not because the actions are necessarily peculiar or harmful to the change but because of a desire to provide themselves with greater degrees of freedom in the ways they deal with recipients.

### Overcoming "Resistance"

A third implication of our reconstruction is that what is currently called "overcoming resistance" is an issue of agents effectively managing the agent-recipient relationship, including making recipient "resistance" and agent sensemaking a public part of the discourse for change. If, as Weick (1979) proposed, the basic units of organizing are the interact and double interact, then resistance cannot be a one-sided recipient response. Rather, it must be a function of participant interactions that shape and are shaped by the nature and quality of the agent-recipient relationship.

A relationship can be understood as a context of background conversations against which explicit foreground actions and communications, such as those taking place during the initiation and implementation of change, will occur (Ford et al., 2002). Background conversations are products of experiences and traditions, both direct and inherited, that provide a space of possibilities and influence the way people listen to what is said and what is unsaid (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Harré, 1980; Heidegger, 1971; Winograd & Flores, 1987). This context shapes the meaning of what is said and whether a particular speaking (including action) is correct or incorrect, appropriate or inappropriate (Wittgenstein, 1958). When we expand the context of change to bring the previously unspoken or assumed concerns of both recipients and agents out of the background and into the foreground conversations for change, agents have the opportunity to engage people in creating new realities, rather than in only prying them loose from old ones.

One thing that can support agents in managing the agent-recipient relationship is their willingness to be responsible for their own sensemaking. When agents are willing to see "resistance" as a product of their own actions and sensemaking, thus taking more responsibility for their role in its occurrence, they are free to choose more empowering and effective interpretations of recipient actions. For example, from a conversational perspective, a change initiative can be seen as a request that can be declined or counteroffered (Goss, 1996; Winograd & Flores, 1987). When someone declines a request, he or she is saying, "I'm not going to do that." When the individual counteroffers, he or she is saying, "I am willing to do that, but X," where X is the

concession he or she is requesting as a condition for accepting the request. In either case, the failure to wholeheartedly accept the request could be interpreted by agents as resistance.

But a counteroffer is a move in a conversation made by someone who is willing and receptive to the request yet is seeking some accommodation. Seeking an accommodation may sound like too many questions, or even like challenges, objections, or complaints. If agents interpret such actions from recipients as refusals to accommodate, participate, or contribute to the change, they forfeit the opportunity to consider the counteroffer being proposed. Agents can deliberately opt to make sense of recipient questions, complaints, and so forth by listening to it all as though it is a counteroffer that can update and refine the change to be more successful.

Relationships, of course, are dynamic and can vary over the duration of a change. Kim and Rousseau (2006), for example, found that although recipients with high-quality employment relationships were more likely to conform to the new norms created by a change than those with low-quality relationships, change instrumentality, not employment relationship quality, was related to recipients' initial participation in change. Since change instrumentality is a function of the credibility of agent communications, these findings suggest that the quality of the agent-recipient relationship may be more important in early rather than later stages of change. Their findings also suggest that high-quality agent-recipient relationships are likely to result in fewer instances of agents labeling recipient actions resistance than are low-quality relationships.

The change agent's job, therefore, must surely include responsibility for the relationship with recipients, as well as the tactics of change implementation. This includes taking charge of the change dialogues to include inquiry that gets to the root of apparently resistive behaviors by bringing both agent and recipient background conversations to the fore and engaging in those actions needed to maintain and improve the agent-client relationship. Overcoming resistance, then, in the restructuring proposed here, becomes an outdated, one-sided concept that ignores agent sensemaking and the agent-recipient relationship and suppresses or sidelines the potential contribution of recipients. Our challenge, rather than suppressing contri-

butions to change, is being sure we engage all of it: recipient action, agent sensemaking, and organizational background and the dynamics of relationship. In so doing, we avoid attributing too much agency to either recipients or agents while finding a balance that describes how they interact to form situational expressions of "resistance to change" (Larson & Tompkins, 2005).

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