

The Positive Role of Resistance in the Conduct of Change¹

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Abstract

Resistance is generally accepted as a given in the conduct of change. It is also reliably seen as a negative factor – an obstacle or barrier to the successful implementation of change. Accordingly, managers are encouraged to adopt various strategies for overcoming and avoiding resistance. This paper takes a different perspective. Consistent with the theme of “a new vision for management in the 21st century”, we propose that it is time to give up the one-sided view of resistance as a problem or obstacle, and consider the positive contributions it makes to effective organizational change. In particular, we propose that resistance to change can keep a change process alive, accelerate the process of implementation, and improve management practices.

It is time to reconsider the role of resistance in organizational change. That people resist change is a generally accepted truth (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Therefore, it is not surprising that considerable attention has been given to identifying the causes of resistance. Some theorists propose that people resist change because it threatens the status quo (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990; Hannan & Freeman, 1988; Hermon-Taylor, 1985; Spector, 1989), thereby increasing their fear and anxiety regarding real or imagined consequences (Morris & Raben, 1995; Smith & Berg, 1987), perhaps threatening their personal security (Bryant, 1989) and undermining confidence in their ability to perform (Morris et al., 1995; O'Toole, 1995). People may also resist change because it threatens their way of making sense of the world by calling into question their values and rationality (Ledford, Mohrman, Mohrman, & Lawler, 1989) and prompting some form of self-justification (Staw, 1981) or defensive reasoning (Argyris, 1990). Other theorists propose that people resist change because they are cynical and distrustful, have past resentments toward those who are leading the change (Block, 1993; Bridges, 1980; Bryant, 1989; Ends & Page, 1977), have understandings or assessments of the situation different from those upon which the change is based (Morris et al., 1995), or perceive that their established social relations are threatened (Lawrence, 1954)). Another contention is that people resist change to preserve autonomy or self-control (Morris et al., 1995).

Regardless of the many reasons posited for people's resistance to change, the consequence of the resistance is always assumed to be the same – resistance is dysfunctional. Resistance is described as an obstacle, barrier, or impairment to the successful and efficient implementation of change; it must, therefore, be overcome, removed, or avoided (Trader-Leigh, 2002). Indeed, individual, group, and organizational inertia are all seen as a consequence of resistance, and detrimental to successful organizational change. Accordingly, change agents are

encouraged to adopt strategies that help avoid or overcome resistance (e.g., Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979).

But is it necessarily true that resistance to change is always dysfunctional? Is it possible that resistance can be recognized, and utilized, as a positive and functional resource in the conduct of change? We think so. We propose that change agents have unwittingly fallen prey to a “resistance bias” – a negative orientation toward resistance – that prevents a complete examination, understanding, and employment of the phenomenon in question. And that, as a result, managers have an incomplete idea of resistance which cripples their ability to recognize its potential value in accelerating, improving, or strengthening organizational change.

Dent and Goldberg (1999) contend that resistance to change has become a received truth and, as such, is accepted as a universal and unquestioned condition of the reality of change. This explains why so much attention has been given to the causes of, and cures for, resistance. The difficulty with received truths, however, is that they are rarely called into question. They are simply accepted as the truth, without further inquiry. While such unwavering faith may be appropriate in some arenas, the beliefs that people necessarily resist change, and that the consequences of resistance are necessarily dysfunctional, are at the root of all kinds of unproductive actions that impede the implementation of change initiatives within organizations (Dent & Goldberg, 1999).

In the spirit of “a new vision for management in the 21st century”, we propose it is time to reconsider the role of resistance in organizational change. More specifically, we propose that resistance to change can be positive, and it is time to give up our complicity in the persistence of a one-sided story about the problem of resistance. Unlike Dent and Goldberg (1999, p.26), we are not surprised that “the conventional wisdom concerning resistance to change has not been

significantly altered by academic work in the past 30 years,” because academics have been among those who have accepted, contributed to, and perpetuated the wisdom. But we think it is time to notice that only one side of the resistance story has been told - the negative side - and to create an opportunity to consider the positive side. After all, dialecticians tell us there is never only one side to an issue – so how can there be only one side to resistance? Accordingly, we propose that resistance to change can actually increase the likelihood of successful implementation, help build awareness and momentum for change, and increase the likelihood that only strong changes get implemented.

We acknowledge that the assertions made here must be accepted as both tentative and speculative. Since there is no research that focuses directly on the positive role of resistance in the conduct of change, we have had to draw on complementary literatures. However, we feel the basis for doing so is both solid and warranted.

Resistance as Interpretation and Attribution

What we call resistance is actually a phenomenon of behaviors and communications. When the behaviors and communications take the form of complaints, refusals to cooperate, grievances, grumblings or arguments in meetings, or the formation of opposition groups which overtly conduct campaigns against a change, we often call them evidence of overt resistance (Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992). When the behaviors and communications take the form of withdrawal, silence, undermining, sabotage, or failing to do the work and then giving accounts that attribute the failure to uncontrollable factors such as the lack of resources or the overload of other immediate work (Scott & Lyman, 1968), we say that these are evidence of covert resistance. In either case, saying that certain behaviors and communications demonstrate “resistance” is tantamount to saying that they are forces opposing the movement of change.

Reconsidering the role of resistance in organizational change requires that we understand existing definitions of the phenomenon, and then look to see whether there is anything inaccurate, missing, or incomplete about the definition. But as Dent and Goldberg (1999) point out, although (because?) resistance is accepted as a given, it is seldom defined. In fact, in their review of the origins and evolution of resistance to change, they found no definitions of resistance other than the one offered by Zander (1950): resistance is “behavior which is intended to protect an individual from the effects of real or imagined change”. Rather than define resistance, the authors reviewed focused on the causes of resistance, defining it only in terms of its perceived purpose, i.e., to protect oneself from the effects of change.

Defining behaviors in terms of their purposes invites inquiry into whether or not those purposes are ever achieved. Do the behaviors and of resistance – either complaints, refusals to cooperate, grievances, arguments, and other overt campaigns against a change; or withdrawal, silence, undermining, sabotage, and failing to do the work while blaming other people or circumstances – successfully thwart change initiatives? On the surface, we think these behaviors have been enormously successful, all the more because they have been practiced reliably by almost everyone since the age of their Terrible Twos. Every child knows the value of a tantrum, and managers no less than parents will respond to those overt and covert signals by slowing or stopping the demand for change, either backing off or accommodating the behaviors and communications of resistance. Resisting the demands of a changing world becomes a deeply rooted habit on the part of children and other people with no other apparent means for participating powerfully in causing, re-directing, or accomplishing the changes they are being asked to make. It may be useful for managers and other change initiators to establish alternative methods for engaging people in making desired changes, perhaps by abandoning the parent-child

interpretations of change and resistance, and offering more opportunities for the exchange of adult behaviors and communications.

Deconstructing Resistance.

The failure to clearly define resistance more precisely than to say it is a purposeful behavior may be a natural outcome of the modernist perspective of most literature on resistance, which presumes that there is a single objective reality, perceivable by everyone (Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002). In this world, we can observe certain behaviors and communications, collect them with a label, and posit them as evidence of a less observable but equally real phenomenon. For example, we can see certain types of clearly observable behaviors, and then call them, collectively, “resistant” behaviors. Resistant behaviors include complaining, sabotage, starting and spreading rumors, hostility, sloppy effort, and fawning submissiveness (Caruth, Middlebrook, & Rachel, 1985; Dent et al., 1999). The process of identifying these behaviors as evidence of resistance is a process which establishes resistance as a real and recognizable phenomenon. In other words, resistance now becomes as real as rocks and organizations, locatable in the real world of objective reality by its specific observable behaviors. At this point, there is no need to define the term, other than to point to its behavioral evidence.

However, in a postmodernist, constructivist perspective, there is no homogeneous reality that is everywhere the same for everyone (Ford, 1999; Ford et al., 2002). Rather, a constructed reality perspective gives us the world as our own invention (Berquist, 1993; Cooper & Burrell, 1988; von Foester, 1984). Through constructivists disagree on what is known and what is real (Spivey, 1997), they share in common the proposition that the world cannot be known directly. Rather, we invent languages that allow us to talk about and create the world we know (Rorty, 1989), and the world does not come with names already attached to its contents. We construct

reality in and through these invented languages. This constructivist perspective asserts all known reality is constructed reality. Resistance, then, is an invention in language.

When we consider that reality is constructed rather than pre-existing, we can then distinguish between what Watzlawick (1990) calls first-order and second-order reality. First-order reality is constructed from physically demonstrable and publicly discernible characteristics, qualities, or attributes of a thing, event, or situation. First-order reality, then, is composed of uninterpreted facts and data that are accessible (i.e., in the world), measurable, and empirically verifiable. There is some systematic and empirical way to demonstrate this reality's existence without relying on any interpretation, understanding, or meaning. In this reality, rocks are rocks.

What differentiates second-order reality from first-order reality is the attachment of meaning. A second-order reality is created whenever we attribute, attach, or give meaning, significance, or value to any first-order reality (Bohm, 1996; Watzlawick, 1990). Second-order reality is not "in" the facts or data of the situation itself, but is an interpretation put there by observers (Watzlawick, 1976) adding their opinions, judgments, assessments, evaluations, and accounts (Harré, 1980) to the physically demonstrable and publicly discernable characteristics of the object or event. Thus, one single first-order reality may be assigned more than one second-order reality, as when two observers report two very different interpretations of the same event. This idea of second-order reality allows one to conclude that "different people in different positions at different moments live in different realities" (Shotter, 1993, p. 17). In second-order reality, rocks are weapons, or places to step while crossing a creek, or decorative objects for a park or garden.

Second-order realities are a consequence of the attributions of meaning to the bare facts of the matter. They are, nonetheless, realities, i.e., people behave and communicate as if the

meaning they themselves have assigned to the facts is true and real. We act as if our interpretations are true, while ignoring (forgetting?) that we are the authors and inventors of those interpretations, and thereby can create other interpretations (Watzlawick, 1990). For example, a patient with a temperature of 103 degrees who states, “My head hurts and I feel nauseous” may be diagnosed as having the flu. The first-order reality of the patient’s data is assigned a second-order reality interpretation of “flu”, and both the diagnosing physician and the patient will operate as if the second-order reality is true by prescribing or consuming flu medicines.

Second-order realities are the natural product of human “sensemaking” (Weick, 1995) whereby people move up a ladder of inference from observable data and experiences, such as behaviors and communications, to making assumptions and drawing conclusions that will provide a basis for action (Argyris, 1990; Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, & Kleiner, 1994). Goss (1996) refers to this process as the cycle of interpretation in which people replace what happened (a first-order reality) with their *interpretation* of what happened (a second-order reality) and then operate as if their interpretation *is* what happened. In Bohm’s (1996) terms, people substitute the present occurrence with a representation from the past (re present) and operate as if the representation is what is present when it is, in fact, not present at all.

Although each of these authors uses different terminology, they share the idea that progression up the ladder, or through the cycle of interpretation, is automatic, and happening unconsciously. As a result, the conclusions reached, at least as they pertain to the phenomenon of resistance to change, are never questioned, but instead are accepted as accurate and factual reflections of “the way things are” and a valid basis for action.

From the constructionist perspective, resistance to change is best understood as a second-order reality, not a first-order reality. There is no “is” resistance to change. Resistance is an interpretation, i.e., a conclusion, assigned by one set of people, the change-makers, initiators, or agents, to the behaviors and communications of another set of people, the prospective change implementers, and especially those who do not appear to be “wholeheartedly embracing a change that [the change agent] wants to implement” (Dent et al., 1999). As a result, employees, managers, and executives can each see the other as resistant to change (Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996).

Resistance to change is an interpretation that, like a medical diagnosis of “flu”, precipitates a course of action that is intended to cure it by some prescribed means. Change agents may prescribe a course of action to deal with the interpretation “resistance” rather than dealing with the specific behavior or communication that is present (Dent et al., 1999; Senge et al., 1994). Unfortunately, the very course of action prescribed could actually impede change efforts by making the interpretation “resistance” more widely accepted as the reality of the situation. An interpretation that is constructed and maintained in the conversational patterns and orders of discourse will add agreement to and validate the interpretation, thereby objectifying that which is described (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and giving credence to its objectivity.

Resistance: A Self-Serving Attribution?

That resistance is an interpretation does not suggest the behaviors or communications to which the interpretation is applied do not actually happen, or that they don’t have negative consequences. They do happen, and they can have negative consequences. Rather, applying the interpretation “resistance to change” may serve to conceal the specific behaviors and communications to which it is attached, and tends to shift responsibility from the change agent to

the purported resister. Dent and Goldberg (1999), for example, point out that the problem of resistance is located in the people who appear to resist² even though what we call resistance is a product of the change agent's interpretation.

Resistance has now been objectified as a psychological phenomenon that exists over there "in the individual" despite the fact that others have argued resistance is an interactive systemic phenomenon (Ford et al., 2002; Kotter, 1996; Lewin, 1947). For Lewin (1947), resistance is a systemic phenomenon, not a psychological one, though human psychology is part of the system. Kotter (1995) proposes that what appears to be resistance is a function of the interconnections and interdependencies in the organization. And Ford et al (2002) contend that resistance is a function of the cultural background conversations in which an individual is operating. If we accept the perspectives of these authors, then what appears to be individual resistance may simply be the result of systemic interactions. The tendency to ignore or downplay systemic factors in favor of more individual and psychological factors such as fear or trust is consistent with the theories on self-serving attributions. For this reason, it seems appropriate to explore the possibility that "resistance to change" is a self-serving attribution.

The literature on self-serving attributions asserts that when people perform poorly, they attribute their failure to external factors, e.g., luck or environmental support, and when they perform well, they attribute their success to personal factors, e.g., effort or ability. Furthermore, attribution literature says that when people perform poorly, observers will attribute the failure to those people's personal factors, e.g., their lack of effort or ability, but when those people perform well, observers will attribute their success to external factors, e.g., luck or environmental support. It seems we want to take credit for our own successes, blame external factors for our

² From this point forward, when we use the term "resist", we are referring to the publicly observable behaviors and communications to which the attribution "resistant" may be attached.

failures, and insure that other people don't get credit for their successes but will be held responsible for their failures.

Self-serving attributions are part of the defensive routines people use when confronted with threatening situations (Argyris, 1990). What makes these attributions self-serving is that they are intended to make the person who is the author of the attribution, i.e., the one constructing the second-order reality by assigning the cause of the success or failure, look good, competent, and unassailable. A change agent who attributes "resistance" as the cause for failure in successfully implementing a change is attributing the failure to external factors, i.e., to those people exhibiting certain behaviors. Presumably, if the change initiative is successful, on time, and under budget, the change agent will claim s/he performed well, rather than attributing success to the absence of resistance. In any case, given that all types of behavior, ranging from open attacks to passivity, are considered evidence of resistance to change (Caruth et al., 1985), resistance is a particularly convenient and elastic excuse or justification for difficulties encountered during the implementation of an organizational change.

It seems reasonable that change agents will engage in the same attribution tendencies and defensive routines (Argyris, 1990) as other people, and that the attributions they make will be consistent with those observed in others. However, this is not evidenced in the literature. It seems that resistance to change is a subject which presumes that all change agents are doing the right things, foiled by the resistance of others. This gives us change agents who look good, competent, and unassailable while everyone else is an obstacle or barrier, intent on "doing in" or "screwing up" the change (Dent et al., 1999). Is it possible that organizational change agents are somehow immune to the principles of attribution theory?

The idea that resistance to change is a self-serving managerial story is consistent with situations in which managers engage in self-betrayal and self-deception (Institute, 2000). Self-betrayal occurs whenever someone doesn't do what they know they should do for someone else. For example, if I know I have information that would help you in some way, and I don't give it to you, that is ultimately a self-betrayal because I'm betraying my own principles to be someone who is supportive of others. The only way I can now justify or excuse withholding that information is by denigrating you in some way – saying, perhaps, that you are too close-minded or resistant to benefit from the information. I then deceive myself by believing this characterization of you, and act accordingly. The result is that I now interact with you as if you are the way I have characterized you, based not on your actions or inactions, but on my own inactions and justifications. Using this framework, resistance can be a form of self-deception resulting from the change agent's self-betrayal: the change agent is unable to produce a successful change implementation, and so makes the self-deceiving assessment that other people must be resisting.

Is it possible that resistance to change is a self-serving attribution, the result of a defensive routine invoked to absolve or mitigate the change agent's responsibility for the consequences of a botched or problematic implementation? Is it possible that resistance is a story used to avoid recognizing other information that might be obtainable from those who are "resisting"? We find it interesting that the originators of the term "resistance to change", Coch and French (1948), were themselves manager-researchers (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). We believe that resistance is a self-serving attribution on the part of managers and change agents, and that that is the reason managers have persisted in keeping this interpretation alive and circulating.

We believe this self-serving purpose is what underlies the unquestioned story of resistance as dysfunctional, with no real investigation of its possible functional consequences.

Resistance to What?

The assumption in “resistance to change” is that people are resisting the change. But this may well not be the case. Dent and Goldberg (1999), for example, cite several studies which question the conclusion that people are resisting the change per se. Therefore, when change agents make the attribution that people’s reactions are evidence of their “resisting change”, and then implement strategies designed to overcome or reduce the resistance, they are not necessarily dealing with the source of the reactions. Indeed, Ford et al (2002) contend that the failure to account for historical background factors fundamental to people’s reactions to change can result in the inappropriate use of strategies to address the reactions. For example, if people have a cynical reaction to a change proposal, using any strategy that depends on trust will not work. The cynicism is not a function of the change, since it has a much longer history than that of the present change initiative.

Why it matters that we may be missing the source of people’s reactions to change is that it further encourages the proposal for reconsidering the role of resistance in organization change. It also highlights that we have not yet developed a very rich vocabulary for talking about resistance. In fact, Dent and Goldberg (1999) contend that resistance to change is treated monolithically and, as a result, strategies for dealing with resistance are offered without regard for the specifics of the change to be implemented. The assumption of monolithic resistance is limiting, not least because it fails to address differences in historical background conversations, managerial and communication abilities of change agents, and the possibility that the “message” sent by behaviors classified as resistant does not need to be interpreted as dysfunctional.

These problems are further compounded by the possibility that what is called resistance may, in fact, actually be an attraction to a different future, one not posed by the change agent. Resistance is oppositional in nature: for one to resist, there must be something to resist, or to be against. But not all noncompliant behavior is oppositional. Trialectics presumes that the source of the behaviors and communications labeled as resistance are actually based in attraction, not opposition (Ford & Ford, 1994). Rather than positing opposition to a change, trialectics presumes that change is a function of an active-attractive relationship in which people are drawn or attracted toward some future state or condition. Depending on what is active for them (i.e., what they are looking for, listening for, open to, etc.), people will behave in ways that reflect this active-attractive relation between their current state and an envisioned future state. According to trialectical logic, people who behave in ways that appear to be supportive of the proposed change are attracted to a future which they have associated with that change. Those who behave in ways that appear to be resisting the proposal are simply attracted to a different future. In this interpretation, people who appear to be resisting a change are simply not attracted to the future that it portends, and instead are acting in ways consistent with some other future which is more attractive to them. What this future is, and how it could be used in service of the current change, will be lost if the change agent interprets all noncompliant behavior as resistance.

Trialectics tells us that people are always engaged in future-supportive behavior, and that they will relate to a proposed change in terms of the future to which they are already attracted, and not necessarily in the terms that are being proposed. For example, a management team that is interested in increasing efficiency could be said to be attracted to a particular future of having an efficient and productive work environment where resources are conserved for more profitable investments than are currently obtainable. Such a group might decide that some form of

rightsizing is an opportunity to cut costs and reduce waste, and might then be predisposed to support a rightsizing initiative because it is a path toward a future to which they are already attracted. Another group, committed to improving customer satisfaction and service, might see the rightsizing initiative as unlikely to support their attractive future, and so would behave in ways that would support a customer focus, and would not support the proposed change (Reger, Mullane, Gustafson, & DeMarie, 1994). Two different futures, one efficiency-related and the other service-related, are both attractive at the same time for different people. People attracted to different futures will have a different relationship to any single proposal for change, which creates the illusion that their response is a resistance to the proposed change itself.

Resistance: A Possible Resource?

In contemporary thinking, resistance to change is a negative factor that inhibits, undermines, and stops a worthwhile change initiative, and impedes its successful implementation. But, this should not be surprising if, as we have proposed, resistance to change is a form of self-serving attribution. After all, if a change agent blames the difficulties and failures of change on resistance, particularly resistance that is located “over there” in the resister, it would be, as the very source of failure, difficult to then make a case for the positive value of resistance.

As a result, from an individual change agent’s perspective, resistance will be seen as something to be avoided or overcome in order to have a successful change implementation. But this is not necessarily the case from the organization’s point of view. When we consider the organization as an organism (Morgan, 1986), any individual change initiative can be likened to a contaminating agent that is attempting to “infect” the organism (Ford, 1999). Using this metaphor, the success of a particular change initiative (i.e., its ability to infect the organization),

depends on the susceptibility of the host and the virulence of the agent. Where the host is highly susceptible (e.g., ready for change), the agent is highly infectious (e.g., invades the organization) and virulent (e.g., has a pronounced and visible effect), the change (“disease”) will progress through different stages, altering organizational discourses, practices, and processes (Ford, 1999). Just such a process is evidenced in the results of Barrett et al (1995).

Immunity, a host’s capacity to resist the effects of an invading agent, is what keeps the organization in existence in the face of pernicious or predatory threats. From the organism’s point of view, a strong immune system is a good resistance system, and will protect it against the potentially damaging effects of foreign matter. Though an individual infective agent might prefer the host to have low immunity, and thus low resistance, such a condition would threaten the organism’s very existence. In fact, where low resistance exists in nature, the organism’s life and health are compromised. An organism that is designed to resist the introduction of new and foreign elements may sometimes reject beneficial changes along with lethal ones, (e.g., some organ transplants). But on the whole, having a strong resistance system is good protection for health and long life. So, resistance may be seen as dysfunctional, and an obstacle to successful change implementation from the standpoint of any particular change agent, but it is highly serviceable for the organization as a whole.

Using this metaphor, there are two lessons to bring to a fresh examination of the phenomenon of resistance to organization change. First, we can recognize that resistance is purposeful, and it is neither a mistake nor an aberration when it arises in a change process. Second, we know that to successfully implement an organizational change will require something more than business as usual. A change agent is someone who is attempting to infect an organization with new conversations, new skills, and new processes and practices. No

organization will permit this easily, nor should it do so. A change agent must bring a high level of intention to a change initiative, along with the skills and persistence to ensure that the implementation is complete and thorough in both depth and reach before closing the books on the change.

In this spirit, we inquire into three ways resistance can be deployed to make that job a little easier, and the results more positive. Resistance, rather than being part of the problem, must become part of the solution, a resource to be harnessed for its contributions to improving the organizational change process and outcomes. In particular, there are three specific contributions provided by the behaviors and communications of resistance: they keep the change alive, accelerate the process of implementation, and improve management practices. It is incumbent on the change agent to put these contributions to work in service of the intended outcomes of change.

Resistance Keeps a Change Alive

Organizational change is, fundamentally, the introduction of new conversations and the shifting of existing conversations in the workplace (Barrett, Thomas, & Hocevar, 1995; Czarniawska, 1997; Ford, 1999). But new conversations have difficulty competing with existing conversations that are well practiced and habituated (Barrett et al., 1995; Kanter, 1989, 2001), not because the new conversation is without value, but because it suffers from the liabilities of newness, inexperience, and unfamiliarity. Add to this the fact that conversations are ephemeral, disappearing when they are not being spoken (Berquist, 1993), and it becomes evident that one of the difficulties change agents have is getting new conversations heard, and ultimately spoken, in enough places, often enough, and long enough that they will catch on and take root (Barrett et al., 1995). Although a change agent(s) may be expected to keep the new conversation alive (i.e.,

in existence), the rest of the organization has no such obligation, and will remain engaged in their current networks of conversation until the new conversation is admitted and practiced.

This is where, in the early stages of a change, those behaviors and communications we call resistance can actually increase the likelihood that the conversations of change will stay in existence and take root. Consider the following example:

“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...” (1999)

Talking in a negative way, e.g., complaining about a change, is considered a sign of resistance (Caruth et al., 1985), but it also serves to keep the subject of the change “in play”. Sometimes bad press is valuable simply by virtue of getting people’s attention: it keeps whatever is being talked against alive and in existence, and gives other people an opportunity to participate in the conversation. Just because the conversation contains criticism or other negativities doesn’t mean it’s not serving the implementation of the change. Barrett et al (1995), for example, point out that criticism to the introduction of total quality leadership actually helped to keep the conversation present, and gave proponents an opportunity they would not otherwise have had to clarify the changes that would make the ideas more sound and accessible.

During the early stages of a change, conversational approaches to change suggest that resistance behaviors and communications are preferable to inattention and the absence of any talk about the change. If, as Tannen (1995) proposes, talk is the lifeblood of managerial work, then not talking about something can be the kiss of death for a change initiative. Indeed, if people want to kill a change, they would be better off not talking about it altogether than contributing all those life-giving “resistance” behaviors and communications to it. The change

agent can thus welcome resistance, and listen closely for cues on how to adjust the shape, size, and plans for the change in order to facilitate still more conversation as the networks adjust themselves to new communication patterns and materials.

Resistance Can Accelerate the Implementation of Change

Resistance can be understood to be a form of conflict between interested parties in which there is a disagreement over ends, and/or the means for achieving those ends. Although the organizational change literature treats this conflict as dysfunctional, research on decision making shows that conflict can be very functional. The difference between functional and dysfunctional conflict has much to contribute to a new view of resistance.

Many organizational changes are the implementation of strategic decisions. A group's effectiveness in resolving strategic problems depends in part on its ability to identify, extract, and use its members' potential contributions (Mitroff & Mason, 1981; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989), both for the formulation of the decision as well as its implementation. So too, the effective implementation of a strategic decision requires the active cooperation of more than one individual or group because such decisions, however fully articulated, can never anticipate the numerous complications that will arise when it is put into action. Details need to be ironed out individually and with attention to preserving consistency with the original decision (Amason, 1996).

A group's effectiveness in resolving or implementing strategic decisions may, however, be impaired when harmony and compliance are honored more than open expression and the evaluation of recommendations and assumptions (Janis, 1972). To counteract this potential problem of suppressing potentially valuable contributions to the strategic dialogue, some decision theorists advocate building dissent and conflict into the decision process, using

techniques such as dialectical inquiry and devil's advocacy (Amason, 1996). Both dialectical inquiry (DI) and devil's advocacy (DA) incorporate conflict into a dialogue by encouraging challenges, questions, and debate of the available recommendations, assumptions, and data. Although the two approaches differ in their specific methodology, they share the idea that the "debates" should continue until participants come to agreement on the assumptions, data, and recommendations (Amason, 1996). DI and DA are both forms of conflict that tap the diversity of knowledge and perspectives of participants while increasing the extent to which they reevaluate their assumptions and recommendations. The risk, of course, is that these processes can negatively impact a participant's experience in the group, and thus may also lessen their acceptance of the group's decisions and their support for implementation (Schweiger et al., 1989).

The issue confronting decision makers, then, is how to have enough functional conflict to improve the quality of decisions without having it reach the point where it will damage the working relationships needed for implementation. When conflict is functional, it is generally task-oriented and focused on different judgments on how best to achieve common objectives. Both DI and DA are characterized by this type of functional conflict, called cognitive conflict, and has been shown to improve decision quality without a loss of participant satisfaction or subsequent acceptance and support (Amason, 1996).

Dysfunctional conflict, on the other hand, is focused on personal incompatibilities or disputes rather than common objectives, and, as a result, tends to be emotional. Emotional conflict can arise whenever the conflict is perceived as personal criticism, or when disagreements are considered politically motivated, and it can be highly contagious (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994), so decision makers must be on alert to the possibility that a functional conflict is

deteriorating into dysfunction. If not successfully managed, emotional conflict can completely disrupt decision making to the point where there will be no decisions or poorly developed ones, accompanied by increased dissatisfaction and acrimony among participants. This renders an effective implementation unlikely.

Distinguishing between functional and dysfunctional types of conflict has value for understanding the positive role of resistance in accelerating the implementation of change. For example, we can consider that what has been called resistance to change is actually a phenomenon having two distinctly different dimensions – cognitive and emotional. Cognitive resistance is associated with the judgmental differences that arise in the process of ironing out those numerous complications of any change implementation. Emotional resistance is associated with other factors than the details of the change implementation, e.g., sensitivities stemming from past broken agreements or personal criticisms.

Cognitive resistance can arise even when there is a shared acceptance of the overall ends, because there may be considerable disagreement concerning how to achieve them. If, for example, the recommended means for achieving the change has undesired implications for someone who is attracted to a different future, they may then push for alterations in the implementation – not because they oppose the change, but in order to keep open the possibility of their realizing the future to which they are attracted (Ford et al., 1994).

In a situation of cognitive, or functional, conflict there will be differences in opinion, including even the realization that the change implementation will not work as planned. These are a welcome resource that can be used to course-correct the implementation of change. Such conflict could be seen as resistance, but it is not something to be overcome. Change agents can engage the conflict, in a manner akin to DI and DA, and use the apparent resistance to improve

the quality of the implementation. To do so, however, requires that change agents consider that not all noncompliant responses to change initiatives are dysfunctional resistance. Change agents would then engage apparent resisters as partners in improving the implementation, rather than as adversaries, and use their contributions to smooth rough edges, redirect elements of the implementation, and expand the reach and accelerate the rate of change adoption.

Emotional resistance, however, is not the same type of phenomenon, and not as directly re-channeled into serving the purposes of the change objectives. The difficulty is that some emotions are not related to present conditions or dialogues, but rather to unresolved issues from the way previous changes were managed (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997). These past changes may have altered psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1996), broken agreements and betrayed trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995), and damaged the credibility of those involved, contributing to present-day resentments (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Kouzes & Posner, 1993; Reichers et al., 1997). Where these background issues have not been addressed and repaired (Ford et al, 2002), a change agent may misconstrue what is a purely cognitive conflict as dysfunctional resistance to change, and attempt to overcome it, thus further aggravating the emotional resistance. Emotional resistance is an indication that some organizational housekeeping is needed in order for the change initiative to gain momentum. Again, using the apparent resistance as a positive indicator, this housekeeping can be accomplished so that the change implementation can proceed more rapidly and thoroughly than was possible with unaddressed historical baggage.

When change agents can differentiate these two types of conflict, they will be able to harness cognitive resistance as a valuable resource for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the change implementation, while dealing appropriately with any apparent emotional

reactions. Research on decision making indicates there is a concave relationship between conflict (cognitive) and decision quality, with an intermediate level of conflict being optimal (Xie, Song, & Stringfellow, 1998). If we accept the premise that there is “cognitive resistance” as well as “emotional resistance”, then the concave relationship suggests change agents need to be cautious about trying to overcome or avoid *all* resistance. In fact, in change dialogues lacking any cognitive resistance, the change agent may want to apply DI and DA or other similar methods for the purpose of increasing the level of conflict.

Considering resistance as a form of conflict supports the proposition that resistance is more of a self-serving attribution than has previously been considered. Conflict is always relational, and is never located exclusively “over there”. Emotional conflict is an “over here” response to perceived injustices or criticisms, a normal defensive routine (Argyris, 1990) that can be exacerbated by a history of broken trust. An emotional response can be located “over here” in either the resister or the change agent, or both. A change agent whose response to cognitive resistance is to squelch, override, or otherwise “handle” it, is bringing his own emotional baggage into the arena of organizational change. The failure to recognize a functional component of resistance will void the opportunity to complete unfinished business from the past and thereby be free to deploy cognitive resistance in service of accelerating the implementation process.

Resistance Serves as a Reminder to Improve Management Practices

The literature on resistance to change gives managers a clear recipe for avoiding and/or overcoming resistance: adopt the management practices that reduce resistance. These practices include: communicating extensively, inviting people to participate, providing them with needed resources, and developing strong working relationships (Caruth et al., 1985; Kotter, 1995; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Kouzes et al., 1993). This list begs the question, what are managers doing

now, if not these very practices? Are these practices not part of good, solid management, rather than clever techniques to be brought out in case of emergency?

It takes something to manage and produce change: managing change is work, and a successful change implementation doesn't happen of its own volition. Where sound management practices have fallen by the wayside, a good dose of resistance to change may be exactly the reminder needed to have these managers dust off their best practices and apply them widely. In fact, the mere threat or anticipation of resistance can encourage managers to improve their management practices in order to avoid it. For this reason, we argue that the behaviors and communications of resistance are a healthy contribution to a higher quality of management. And even though the change implementation will one day be complete, it is just possible at least some of the improved management skills will continue being employed long into the future.

Discussion

Since its inception, resistance to change has been considered something that needs to be minimized, avoided, or overcome for an organizational change to be successfully implemented. Inherent in this position is the assumption that resistance is entirely dysfunctional. We disagree. There are pluses to resistance (Pascarella, 1987; Powell & Posner, 1978). Unfortunately, because the current model of resistance to change does not allow for functional resistance, these pluses have been ignored.

We are not suggesting that there are no behaviors and communications that do damage to, are an obstacle to, or undermine an organizational change. Clearly this happens. What we are saying is that just because some responses to change are not what managers wanted, expected, or hoped for does not mean they are forms of resistance that will necessarily be detrimental to the change. Quite the contrary. We are proposing that there is a positive side to resistance and that

it is time to investigate it. If conflict can be functional for decision making, then can resistance be understood to serve the effective implementation of an organizational change.

Individual vs. Systemic Sources of Resistance

Dent and Goldberg (1999) argue that part of the reason for the current and limiting assumptions about resistance to change is that the concept has been pared down since its origin. Initially envisioned as a systemic phenomenon by Lewin, it has lately come to be understood as a psychological phenomenon, located over there in a resisting individual. The result of this shift in focus from system to individual is that change initiators have largely been absolved of responsibility for the failure of change implementations. Indeed, a careful examination of the suggested methods for dealing with resistance reveals that none of the them direct the change initiator do such things as (1) repair trust resulting from broken agreements (Lewicki et al., 1995), (2) address and resolve issues of mistreatment or injustice (Folger et al., 1999), (3) admit mistakes or take other actions that restore credibility (Kouzes et al., 1993; Reichers et al., 1997), or (4) complete and bring closure to the past (Albert, 1983; Ford et al., 2002). Rather, the resistance-resolution strategies applied by change agents tend to focus on various forms of communication and involvement in order to deal with the fears, misunderstandings, and uncertainties of those individuals who are said to be resisting rather than addressing the more systemic sources of resistance.

The demotion of resistance from a systemic to an individual or small group phenomenon has also stripped change agents of other tools for improving the success rate of organizational changes. People respond to changes in many ways, only some of which are truly dysfunctional with respect to the change being introduced. But even when the behaviors and communications are injurious to the change, we cannot be certain if the observed response is directly related to the

change in question (Reichers et al., 1997). Whatever the change is, it is only one aspect of an ongoing working relationship between those who initiate and those who will implement change. As research on decision conflict shows, if that relationship is not an effective working one, implementation will be difficult. Rather than directing change agents to address individual psychological or social attributes of the prospective implementers, it would be more appropriate to recommend they “develop or rehabilitate, and maintain or improve effective working relationships” as a key strategy for avoiding resistance. Evidence suggests that even though this seems an obvious and natural practice of change agents and other managers, it is not, in fact, their first order of business when implementing a change.

The Limiting Dichotomy of Resistance

The current model of resistance as a problem or obstacle to change presumes a “right” and a “wrong” way for people to respond to a change initiative. Early adapters are responding in the right way, and those who exhibit certain behaviors and communications questioning or expressing displeasure are responding in the wrong way. Further, this model establishes an “either-or” dichotomy: people are either “for” the change or “against” it, and one is either part of the solution or part of the problem.

This framework is only one possible structure for seeing the roles of resistance and change (Ford & Backoff, 1988). An alternative structure is “both-and”, which allows for someone to be both for and against a change. For example, someone can be in favor of the desired ends, but not the means, or vice versa. Such a situation would be consistent with cognitive conflict and offers the opportunity for the development of more effective means, or more expansive or inclusive ends. For the change agent, this “resistance” is actually useful feedback rather than problems and obstacles.

The “either-or” dichotomy of the existing model of resistance to change also creates the equivalent of a zero-sum contest in which respective parties interact with each other in positional monologues. Because there is no inclusive playing field, the change agent must find ways to have people who are against the change shift their position and work for its implementation. Thus enters the resistance-resolution strategies. A “both-and” perspective, on the other hand, creates the opportunity for a partnership in which dialogue, rather than positional monologues, will predominate (Isaacs, 1993). With a “both-and” interpretation of the situation, people who appear to be resisting a change can be recognized as engaged in the change by virtue of their having something to say about it. The change agent in this situation is working with people who were once dismissed as resisters, to people whose engagement can now be harnessed as a contribution to the pace, methods, or requirements of the change.

A final danger of the “either-or” model of resistance to change is that it can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Winslow (quoted in Dent & Goldberg, 1999, p. 38) 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.

Indeed, if we believe people are either for or against a change, we will find ourselves listening in order to determine which category best matches their behaviors and communications. As a result, questions, complaints, upsets, objections, and even silence can all be heard as resistance instead of as simply one of the many varied responses people can have to something new.

Ultimately, the either-or perspective creates a particular predisposition that is difficult to escape. If we accept the assertion that people resist change, then it is not much of a leap to conclude that change initiators also resist change. And one of the changes they are likely to

resist is the appearance of resistance on the part of those who are to implement the change. In other words, change agents may themselves respond directly, indirectly, or even passively (Caruth et al., 1985) to the reactions of others, resulting in an escalation in and persistence of resistance (Powell et al., 1978). Additionally, the change agent is likely to be highly positional about the rightness of the change and the wrongness of resistance, especially if there are career consequences associated with the success of the change. Responses to a proposed change which suggest that more input or effort is needed than was originally planned to gain a successful implementation will be difficult to celebrate at any time, and more so when they are attended by matters of budget, promotion, or other performance deadlines. But even though it may be natural to see resistance as the “wrong” response and to blame those who deliver it, the strategies of dealing with individual psychologies and group social attributes will not go far toward producing a successful implementation.

A Relational Representation of Resistance

A change initiative can be understood as an attempt at shifting the network of conversations and discourses that constitute an organization (Barrett et al., 1995; Fairclough, 1992; Ford, 1999). From this framework, a change initiative is a request (Goss, 1996; Winograd & Flores, 1987) made by the change agent to the people who will implement the change; resistance is a demonstration that the implementers are either declining the request or making a counteroffer.

When someone declines a request, they are saying, “I’m not going to do that.” When they counteroffer, however, they are saying, “I am willing to do that, but X” where “X” is the concession they in turn request as a precondition for committing to accept the request. The

concession might be a change in the timing, an alteration in the result to be produced, or any number of other things that will make it acceptable for them to say “yes” to the request.

A counteroffer is an opening move in negotiation. If managers respond to all resistance as if it constitutes a refusal to participate, they have forfeited the opportunity to consider that there is a counteroffer being given. Granted, it may take some time and effort to identify the concessions that will be required, but clearly the interpretation that resistance is a rough attempt at a counteroffer holds the possibility for moving forward with the change. Unfortunately, since the literature on resistance to change does not differentiate between outright refusals (declines) and counteroffers, we have no way of knowing the extent to which managers have confused them, or what lessons might have been learned by responding to resistance as if it were an opening to negotiation.

We are advocating some double-loop learning about resistance to change. Rather than simply continue refining the results of our modernist assumptions about resistance, we think it is time to fundamentally question the source of resistance and its role in change. It is time to consider that the phenomenon called resistance to change is relational, and as such is a two-sided issue, not a one-sided one.

In the modernist perspective, there is only one real world, and so any differences in ways of understanding that world are either mistakes or misunderstandings. Accordingly, the job of a change agent is to show people the “errors of their ways” and bring them into alignment with reality. But in a constructivist view, there is no “one real world” that is knowable independent of one’s point of view. For a constructivist, different points of view are valid, though there may be different levels of agreement for and utility in them (Watzlawick, 1990), i.e., there is no “right way” or “wrong way”, there are just “different ways”. Using this model, resistance is neither

capricious nor mysterious (Senge et al., 1994). Nor is it one-sided. The reactions people have to change are varied, and they are influenced by much more than any single change initiative alone, however complex or large-scale it may be.

We propose that change agents reconsider resistance to be providing valuable and useful feedback on the quality of the relationship between the change initiators and the change implementers. From this stance, we can see that resistance resolution strategies do, in fact, improve the relationship between initiators and implementers. But it also suggests that change initiators can profitably look further than they now do to see how their actions (or inactions) contribute to the progress and success of the change implementation. Rather than attribute implementation problems to resistance, the change agent can look at a bigger picture than the social and psychological factors of people involved.

Rousseau (1996) has shown that when psychological contracts are violated, people will resist change. In turn, change is one of the things that produces violations of psychological contracts. Yet, the failure to acknowledge the role of past broken agreements in the appearance of dysfunctional change can add to resentments that will be “paid back” in other ways, including resistance to future changes. Resistance, then, can serve to notify us that something is incomplete or unresolved in the relationship between change initiator and change implementer, thus providing an opportunity for dialogue and closure conversations (Ford & Ford, 1995).

The idea that resistance is an attribution (i.e., second-order reality) which is assigned to an event or occurrence (i.e., first-order reality) posits the diagnosis of resistance as being much like the diagnosis of flu – it calls forth and justifies a particular course of action (e.g. Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979). Less obviously, if change managers are willing to take responsibility for their role in creating a more flexible response to apparent “resistance” by seeing it as a second-

order, interpreted reality rather than a first-order factual reality, they can be free to choose more empowering responses to resistance. If resistance is an interpretation of behaviors and communications, then any form of action (including non-action) can be interpreted either as an attempt to undermine the change or to modify the change for the better. Change agents control the attributions they make and the sense they make of phenomena, events, and things. For example, the question, "Why are we doing this?" can be readily seen as a sign of resistance, but can equally be interpreted as creating an opportunity to accelerate the adoption of the change by making its need and objectives more evident. The choice, and the attending response, is up to the change agent who can reframe the conditions and circumstances of each communication, and permit the implementation to move forward with a wider and deeper base of engagement.

We are not calling for the end of the resistance to change model, but we are proposing that, at a minimum, the model be modified to include the positive contributions of resistance to change. Resistance behaviors and communications are only one of the many responses people have to change. When we include everything from hostile attacks to silence as resistance, and apply the term to everything from well planned, led, and executed initiatives to ones that are completely without plans, agendas, or management, we are bound to conceal significant differences that could offer opportunities for engaging people more effectively. As a result, we have a small and only mildly successful set of strategies for dealing with resistance, as if "one size fits all".

This article, like others before it, de-centers resistance from the individual in order to view it as a relational phenomenon, created, sustained, and modified in the social interactions of organization members. Rather than seeing resistance as a personal attribute of an individual, or a social characteristic of a group, we consider resistance as arising in our relationships with one

another, and also with other things and phenomena, e.g., our relationship to the past and future. When resistance is seen as a relational phenomenon, it gives change agents, initiators, and managers unacknowledged positive benefits and opportunities for accomplishing successful organization changes. Though there is considerably more work to be done to articulate the extent, nature, and form of this benefit, there does appear to be some basis for the assertion. It remains to be seen, however, whether we will embrace such a proposition, or if we will resist it.

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