



MANAGING YOURSELF

Strong leaders can hear and learn from their critics.

Decoding Resistance to Change

by Jeffrey D. Ford and Laurie W. Ford

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Decoding Resistance to Change

The Idea in Brief

You announce a change initiative. Some employees are silent; others complain. You bristle at this “threat” and determine to squelch the resistance.

But wait: Resistance is a form of feedback from people with deep knowledge about your company’s daily operations. Treat their concerns as valuable information, and you gain important ideas for communicating and executing the change initiative. And you win buy-in essential for success.

Consider: A manager proposed merging the billing group with her call center to create a large customer-service function. Because this required cross-training in both tasks, everyone balked at the extra work. But when she asked them for suggestions for implementing the change, they perked up. One idea—billers and callers training each other—struck gold, and fostered collaboration postmerger.

The Idea in Practice

How to use resistance to effect productive change:

EXPLAIN WHAT’S CHANGING

With any change effort, the jobs of people lower in the organization will change in ways higher-ups may not anticipate. Don’t suppress dialogue about what the change will involve; you’ll miss opportunities to gain these employees’ buy-in. Instead, encourage any talk about the initiative—even complaints and heated discussion. They might be the only things that keep a conversation about the change alive.

EXPLAIN WHY

Help people who aren’t involved in planning the change understand why their jobs are being upended.

► Example:

An IT executive wanted to improve her hospital’s computer systems for patient registration and insurance reimbursement. She communicated regularly about the change with the rest of the executive team. But no one explained to rank-and-file employees how the move would benefit patients and the bottom line. Launch meetings were contentious until the executive arranged meetings for the entire hospital staff explaining the reasons for the change.

LOOK FOR THE PITFALLS

Gather input from people who voice their reservations about the change. Often, they genuinely care about getting things right and are close enough to the company’s inner workings to recognize a proposed change’s pitfalls.

► Example:

The COO of a large manufacturing company wanted to consolidate two groups—product-design engineers, and capital-planning engineers—to improve collaboration and efficiency. The capital-

planning engineering manager objected in strong but vague terms. When the COO probed deeper, the manager revealed that key players would leave if the consolidation took place. The manager ultimately proposed an entirely different plan that met the company’s goals more effectively than the original one.

ELICIT IDEAS

To build participation and engagement in your change initiative, simply ask employees for their ideas on how to make the change work. By using their good ideas, you stoke their enthusiasm, sense of ownership, and commitment to the change.

UNCOVER PAST FAILURES

Resistance to change can stem from unhappiness over problematic earlier initiatives. People expect history to repeat itself—and they resist going through it all over again. Find out what happened to previous change efforts. You may uncover clues to resistance to your current initiative.

► Example:

A manager of a vehicle-service organization who proposed updating the group’s technology encountered stiff resistance. He learned that his predecessor had promised raises and promotions to employees who mastered new technology tools. Though the employees came through, they never got the promised rewards because their then-boss left the company. After the new manager apologized for his predecessor, employees’ skepticism about his proposed change dissolved.

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When change initiatives run aground—as they so often do—change agents can be quick to point a finger at the people who never got on board. The assumption is that they resisted a perfectly logical move, so it fell apart.

However, blaming resisters not only is pointless but can actually lead to destructive managerial behaviors. When managers perceive resistance as a threat, they may become competitive, defensive, or uncommunicative. They are sometimes so concerned with being right—and not looking bad—that they lose sight of their original goals. In stubbornly pushing things through without understanding the resistance, they sacrifice goodwill, put valuable relationships in jeopardy, and squander the opportunity to engage skeptics in service of a better plan. They don't hear about missing pieces and faulty assumptions. And, in true us-versus-them fashion, they presume that only the other folks—the resisters—need to alter their behavior and that the change would succeed if not for the resisters' irrational and self-serving actions.

It's true that resistance can be irrational and self-serving. But like it or not, it is an important form of feedback. Dismissing it robs you of a powerful tool as you implement change. It takes a strong leader to step up and engage when a change effort meets with pushback. If you can gain perspective by paying attention to, understanding, and learning from behaviors you perceive as threatening, you will ultimately deliver better results.

Resistance Is a Resource

In our research and consulting work, we've had the opportunity to study change initiatives at scores of large and small companies, and we've found that to understand resistance to a program, you need to start by adjusting your own mind-set. Ask yourself two questions: "Why am I seeing this behavior as resistance?" and "If I viewed the resistance as feedback, what could I learn about how to refine the change effort?" Once you've honestly answered those questions, you can begin to see resistance as a resource—as energy to be

channeled on behalf of the organization. (See the sidebar “Defining Resistance.”) Even difficult people can provide valuable input when you treat their communications with respect and are willing to reconsider some aspects of the change you’re initiating. Here are five ways you can use resistance to effect change more productively.

1. Boost awareness. By the time you’re ready to implement a change program, you’ve probably had ample opportunity to process what it will mean for you as an individual. It’s easy to forget that the change hasn’t been similarly internalized by those who will be most affected by it—in ways you can’t imagine. Drop two levels down in the hierarchy, and the tasks people are doing are probably invisible to you. Their jobs will change in ways that you don’t understand, and if you suppress dialogue, you’ll miss opportunities to gain their buy-in. In the early stages, any talk—even a litany of complaints or a highly charged discussion—may be the one thing that keeps a conversation about change alive.

2. Return to purpose. Awareness is about *what*; purpose is about *why*. People who aren’t involved in the planning need to understand not only what is about to change but also why their jobs are being upended.

We worked with Alison, an IT executive who was preparing for a change in her hospital’s computer systems for registration and insurance reimbursement. With those two functions at the opposite ends of the business cycle, the new systems would touch almost every employee, including clinical and laboratory personnel, in some way. The initiative was a crucial one because delays in reimbursement are costly to hospitals, and the most common reason for rejecting claims is incomplete or inaccurate information. When a bill bounces back, it can take a long time to track down the error; some irregularities are never resolved.

Throughout the design process, Alison had communicated regularly with the rest of the executive team, preparing handouts for them to take back to their groups. Given that effort on her part, she’d assumed that the executives would explain to rank-and-file employees how the move would benefit not just the company’s bottom line but also the patients the company served, by ensuring they received the right treatments and were not wrongly billed. As it

turned out, the executives had been reluctant to deliver what they feared would be seen as bad news, and leaders from functions such as finance and clinical services didn’t feel equipped to answer questions about the new technology. They’d hoped that Alison would take charge of the kickoff, so their people had heard only rumors—and no explanation of the rationale for the change. Consequently, her launch meetings were contentious. The insurance team, which feared that historical files would become inaccessible, was particularly annoyed.

Alison had to postpone the rollout and arrange a series of meetings to explain the changes, with IT team members at the ready to describe their implications. Though she was disappointed that the members of the management team hadn’t communicated with their own people, she acknowledged a key lesson: The pushback from frontline employees made her appreciate the need to educate the entire hospital staff about the purpose of the systemic change.

3. Change the change. Frustrating though it is, resistance can lead to better results. People who are outspoken about their objections to a change are often those who genuinely care about getting things right and who are close enough to the inner workings of an organization to recognize a plan’s pitfalls.

Consider Harold, the COO of a large manufacturing organization we worked with. He had drawn up a plan to consolidate two groups: the product design engineers, who worked at the main office, and the capital-planning engineers, who worked in the plants. His objective was to improve collaboration, communication, and efficiency. But when Harold announced his plan, Eric, the manager of the capital-planning engineers, voiced strong objections at every turn. As the meeting progressed, Harold grew reluctant to allow Eric to speak; his vague and ambiguous complaints were incomprehensible to Harold and made people uneasy about the change.

Harold later invited Eric in for a private discussion and, with some probing, discovered what was really bugging him. The capital-planning engineers worked closely with a third group, plant maintenance, to make decisions about what equipment to buy, lease, repair, and so on. “You don’t want to have me reporting to the product design group or even

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the engineering VP,” Eric told Harold. “I belong with the plants because that’s where my work is.” Furthermore, the head of maintenance had informed Eric that he would start looking for a new job—taking a couple of his best mechanics with him—if he was not on the same team with the capital-planning engineers. He didn’t want to have to beg for engineering support or miss chances to offer his input about capital purchase decisions.

Eric was surprised when Harold asked him for alternative ideas that would still meet the objectives of the consolidation plan. Eric proposed a biweekly, half-day “consolidation meeting” of all the engineering teams in the company. The gathering would have a specific agenda: to address machine status and maintenance issues, equipment needs related to partnerships and product lines, and capital investment plans. “My consolidation plan was out the window,” Harold admitted. But the new plan met the company’s goals more effectively than his initial proposal had.

4. Build participation and engagement.

Buy-in can be a simple matter of being heard, as the experience of Sharon, the leader of a 110-person phone center we worked with, shows. Sharon was preparing to integrate a group of 30 billing specialists with the existing workforce. Her plan called for telephone staff

to learn how to send and adjust bills, and for billing staff to become skilled at other customer service tasks. She believed the company would benefit from having a larger group of people who were cross-trained in the two aspects of customer relationships.

Sharon anticipated some pushback when she introduced the change in a series of meetings with the staff, and she got it in spades. So she took careful note of everyone’s concerns and ideas, ultimately creating a “worry list” and an “idea list” from among the most common and important items. The biggest worries concerned pay scales and the apportionment of physical space when the groups merged. The idea list included proposals that had been offered in every group (for instance, mix the staff together in similar cubicles); ideas suggested by only a few people with specialized knowledge (get a second intranet server to support faster communication); and a few wild cards, which Sharon thought were unlikely to go anywhere. Among the wild ones: let the billers train the phoners and the phoners train the billers, and give the staff the unspent training dollars as a bonus; forget about cross-training and move everybody into the same area but keep their functions separate; go ahead with the cross-training but don’t move the billers into the call center.

Defining Resistance

Managers have many terms to describe resistance: pushback, not buying in, criticism, foot-dragging, and so on. And they may perceive as resistance a broad spectrum of behaviors they don’t like—from an innocent question to a roll of the eyes to overt sabotage.

Moreover, whether something constitutes resistance is a subjective matter, on both sides. Consider the experiences of David, Elaine, and Allen, managers at an insurance company who held meetings in their respective units to inform people about the launch of a new performance-management system. These meetings were the first opportunity for front-line employees to learn the particulars.

The three compared notes afterward. David said he’d gotten considerable “pushback” in the form of “a ton of questions.” He’d felt as if he were being “interrogated”; employees were “irritated” when he didn’t know the answers.

Elaine didn’t get a single question and characterized the shallow comments and silence as “stonewalling.” Allen described his people as “very receptive.” They’d asked many questions, and although some employees were disappointed when he didn’t have an answer, he promised to get back to them. Overall, he reported a “very engaging and energizing” meeting.

We didn’t attend these meetings, but disparate attitudes toward resistance are nonetheless evident in the managers’ responses. Two opposite behaviors—asking questions and not asking questions—were perceived as resistance, depending on the manager. Asking questions was itself seen in different ways, either as resistance or as engagement. Meanwhile, so-called resisters probably didn’t view their own behavior as inconsistent with the organization’s objectives.

(When managers themselves exhibit “resistant” behavior, they often rightly don’t see it as such. Indeed, it’s usually a manifestation of a rational, reasonable desire to be heard.)

Quite possibly, Elaine unconsciously discouraged questions; alternatively, the members of her group might legitimately have had nothing to ask—they’d heard enough. She simply chose to see stonewalling in their silence. David didn’t consider the possibility that either his lack of answers or his failure to promise to get them might have contributed to people’s irritation. His folks might even have been surprised to hear him label their questions as “pushback,” given that the meeting was seemingly an opportunity to get answers. Allen, in contrast, appeared to enjoy the dialogue, questions and all—a receptiveness that exemplifies a productive reaction to resistance.

To Sharon's surprise, they jumped at the prospect of training one another.

Sharon took the worry and idea lists to the rest of the executive team and, with their input, created a third “executive action list.” She then brought the three lists into follow-up meetings with staff. Employees bypassed suggestions to reject cross-training and relocation; they knew those were basically nonnegotiable. But, to Sharon’s surprise, they jumped at the prospect of training one another—a proposal she’d considered so ridiculous that she hadn’t even taken it to the executive team. Employees were so enthusiastic about that idea that the group came up with a way to integrate it into the plan. Sharon said that, regardless of her own opinion, it was worth the effort to let them “get something they felt was at least partly their own.” She willingly embraced the core concerns of her people—which were really about whether they’d get along and whether different groups would remain socially separate even after they were collocated—and she held events to forge stronger relationships among them. In the process, Sharon bonded with her employees and fostered good cooperation as they underwent training and then collaborated in their new location.

5. Complete the past. As employees listen to new proposals, they remember previous experiences. Given the dismal rate of success in change efforts, it’s not surprising that people expect history to repeat itself—and resist going through it all over again. If you don’t know the history, an explanation for the resistance can remain elusive.

George, the head of a vehicle service organization we studied, planned to upgrade his maintenance team’s technology by giving the group GPS and computer communications systems. He had met with the fleet and service supervisors one-on-one, and he knew they wanted these systems. But when he spoke to them as a group about the installation and training schedules, the supervisors surprised him by saying, “This isn’t going to be fair for the backroom machine guys,” “You’re going around us again,” and “This won’t work any better than last time.”

When George probed into their skepticism, one supervisor finally mentioned an incident from a training program two years earlier. George’s predecessor had promised promotions and pay raises to the purchasing and inventory staffers if they could switch

to a new system within eight weeks. The four men involved buckled down and learned the new system, transferred inventory data, and updated their records in time—but they never received their promotions or pay hikes. Embarrassed, the manager at the time found a poor substitute for three of them—some overtime opportunities—and promised the fourth a promotion when he reached his two-year anniversary. But that never came to pass because the manager left the company before the anniversary.

The men believed that the manager had never intended to obtain raises and promotions. They’d also convinced themselves that his decisions had racial and cultural overtones. Although George hadn’t been the cause of the problem, he knew he would have to live with its consequences. His solution: a heartfelt public apology to the employees, on behalf of the company, for their having been misled and for the lack of respect demonstrated by leaving the problem unresolved. He went further, offering his personal apology to each man and promising he would do what he could to “make it right.”

George kept his promise. He met with the director of HR and the VP of operations to see that the purchasing and inventory personnel got their promised titles and the best pay increases the budget would allow. Three weeks later, the HR director met personally with the men to tell them when the pay hikes would take effect. As their skepticism finally began to dissolve, one inventory manager said, “You know what made the biggest difference to me? Seeing that George was shocked and sorry to find out we had been treated like that in the first place. The way he said he was sorry, even though he hadn’t done anything, I knew we had a friend.”

George’s experience makes clear that responses to a change proposal may have little or nothing to do with the current plan. Unacknowledged failures in past change efforts, questionable ethical incidents, and negative cultural tendencies are often invisible backdrops to a newly planned change.

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Our work has turned up many instances in which people resisted a change for no apparent reason other than that change didn’t suit them. However, in the end, it doesn’t really matter why folks are dragging their feet. When

we pin failure on resistance, we risk overlooking opportunities to strengthen operational outcomes—and to correct our own biases. We also lose credibility in the eyes of change recipients, who may in turn withhold their specialized knowledge and sabotage the success of the change initiative. Resistance, properly understood as feedback, can be an important resource in improving the quality

and clarity of the objectives and strategies at the heart of a change proposal. And, properly used, it can enhance the prospects for successful implementation.

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Further Reading

ARTICLES

[Lead Change—Successfully, 3rd Edition](#)

HBR Article Collection
October 2005
Product no. 1908

Seventy percent of all change initiatives fail. Why? We don't establish essential elements—such as the right project team configuration or sufficiently frequent milestone reviews—before launching a transformation program. Pressured to demonstrate results quickly, we skip crucial steps in the change process; for example, creating short-term wins that build momentum for subsequent successes. Sometimes we wrongly assume that change is all about improving financial results—stock price, profitability, sales. We forget that successful transformation also generates “soft” benefits, such as trust, new organizational capabilities, and emotional commitment among employees. But even if we strive for both financial *and* nonfinancial results, additional perils await: painful emotions that boil up when we ask people to think or do things differently. Whether it's anger, alarm, or confusion, we must ease those feelings by cultivating an environment of trust and empowerment. Nothing about leading change is easy. But this *Harvard Business Review* Article Collection offers ideas for tackling the biggest challenges—and avoiding the most dangerous pitfalls.

[Change Through Persuasion](#)

by David A. Garvin and Michael A. Roberto
Harvard Business Review
February 2005
Product no. R0502F

Faced with the need for a massive change, most managers respond predictably. They revamp the organization's strategy, shift around staff, and root out inefficiencies. They then wait patiently for performance to improve—only to be bitterly disappointed because they've failed to prepare employees adequately for the change. In this article, the authors contend that to make change stick, leaders must conduct an effective persuasion campaign—one that begins weeks or months before the turnaround plan is set in concrete. Like a political campaign, a persuasion campaign is largely one of differentiation from the past. Turnaround leaders must convince people that the organization is truly on its deathbed—or, at the very least, that radical changes are required if the organization is to survive and thrive (a particularly difficult challenge when years of persistent problems have been accompanied by few changes in the status quo). And they must demonstrate through word and deed that they are the right leaders with the right plan. Accomplishing all this calls for a four-part communications strategy. Prior to announcing a turnaround plan, leaders need to set the stage for employees' acceptance of it. At the time of delivery, they must present a framework through which employees can interpret information and messages about the plan. As time passes, they must manage the mood so that employees' emotional states support implementation and follow-through. And at critical intervals, they must provide reinforcement to ensure that the desired changes take hold and that there's no backsliding. Using the example of the dramatic turnaround at Boston's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, the authors elucidate the inner workings of a successful change effort.

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