

“Oh no not another initiative!”
Resistance to Change in Organisations and how to deal with it

Wherever there is change there is resistance. In this document I hope to raise some key points about the value of resistance and then move onto outline the form resistance can take and what can be done about it.

SOME KEY POINTS ABOUT RESISTANCE

1. In whatever form resistance is a message. It is a way of saying “This is not working for me. I have needs that are not being met”
2. Resistance is a sign that the process of change has begun, you cannot resist that which you are not aware of and so something is happening to bring up the resistance.
3. Resistance is also often misconstrued as “people not wanting to change”. On the contrary, people generally are motivated to want to grow and develop and keep improving. Change and the way it is handled can bring up anxiety for people and these results in them adopting seemingly resistive attitudes and behaviour in order to keep their anxiety at bay.
4. We all learn and change in different ways, so for someone to stop and ask “Why?” might be a reflection of that person’s need for a model to explain the change or proof that the change will work in practice.
5. Overt resistance is healthy, after all if it’s out in the open it’s much easier to work with and it indicates that people are open to being convinced otherwise. Inviting people to voice their concerns and different opinions keeps things overt.
6. Unexpressed resistance is much harder to deal with. If people don’t express their concerns then how can they be addressed?
7. How resistance is viewed and responded to will make the difference in terms of whether it becomes a block to change or whether it is harnessed as a creative process that allows previously not thought of solutions and steps to emerge.

WHY AND HOW PEOPLE RESIST AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT?

Overwhelm

In this information age where we are constantly bombarded with words and pictures on TV, the radio, by email, snail mail, text, newspapers. Have you ever wanted to scream “No more, too much!”?

Similarly when we are undergoing lots of change we become overloaded and yet we often lack the ability to take a break. On the one hand we may appear to buy into the change, while on the other; we don’t follow through any actions in relation to it. One organisation I worked with actually used to say “We suffer from “changitis”, so when new ideas are suggested we respond, “Oh no, not another initiative!””

Solution

When people are overwhelmed it is really important to check out the need for change and ascertain people’s level of fullness. Encourage people to be more assertive so they can say “no” when they need to and then pace and grade change so it works for them.

Overwhelm at the Top

Complexity and responsibility are what frequently overwhelms the top team. Not just responsible for themselves, directors also have the whole company and its complexities to be responsible for. The result can be that each director focuses and specializes only on their own territory and resists pulling together as a team to lead the whole organisation.

Solutions

- Create a common vision and values and break this down into the behaviours and skills in tune with these values as a way of pulling the team together and creating a culture that embraces positive change and development.
- Recognise the top teams need for specific areas of responsibility and develop ways in which information can be shared with the team as a whole and encourage ways in which each member can learn more about their fellow director's areas.
- Look for joint work opportunities to where top team members can work in partnership
- Practice mutual coaching of each other in order that they all become equally committed to each other's success
- Encourage simplification of responsibility through creating responsibility in others.

Lack of self awareness of the leader and/or facilitator of the change

The agenda of the leader and the facilitator will all affect how receptive people are to change. If I as leader of the organisation decide that a change should take place and impose it on people, I am going to meet with resistance. When saying, "you should" to people you are communicating in a "parental" style and the natural response of people is therefore to react like a child, some will comply others may rebel.

Solutions

- Develop awareness and communicate needs and requirements in an adult way that encourages people to feel safe.
- Communicate and engage with people about the change as soon as possible and ensure that their opinion is taken into account.

Beliefs around change

We all carry beliefs about what is good and what isn't. If there is an overriding belief that change is not OK, then people will resist

Solutions

- Resolve this by pointing out the reality in relation to the belief; be clear of the positive nature of the change.
- If the change isn't all positive look at raising awareness of disempowering beliefs then reframing beliefs so that they are empowering as opposed to limiting.

Fear

Our beliefs often feed our emotions and fear is usually the emotion that is at the root of resistance.

Solution

What's important is to get to the route of the fear, what is it really about? Then ascertain people's needs. When these are met the fear goes away. For example in a team merger where the structure of the team was changing from one of multi tasking to one where people were specialists, people were anxious they would lose status and recognition. Once they realised that being a specialist would mean they developed high levels of expertise in their area and

that they would be coached and trained to support them in this, their fear reduced and they became committed and skilled members of the team.

Ambivalence

Ambivalence is the result of internal conflict around the change. For example, I might be excited about the opportunities a change can bring and yet anxious at losing a job I enjoy. So there's a part that wants to change and a part that doesn't.

Often with ambivalence, people don't voice their concerns. They may say yes in principle, but then act differently.

Solutions

- Checking out where people are at is really important. Forcing someone to move in one direction or another is not going to work.
- Allow space for people to be ambivalent and work with how they can bring together the 2 parts of themselves that are in conflict.

Defence mechanisms

We all have finely tuned ways or defence mechanisms to stop us opening up to painful memories and experiences from our past. When in group's people may often feel vulnerable having their past tapped into and so resist through using humour, lateness, justification, silence, cynicism.

Solution

- Any training or facilitation needs to take place in an environment that is safe and activities such as role-plays are gently paced.
- Be aware that some issues will be too personal and not appropriate to be dealt with within the context of a group and people would be better served to deal with these in a one to one situation.

IN SUMMARY

There are many ways that people can resist change and at the end of the day resistance is a message. Our philosophy is to use resistance as a guide, find what is at the root of the it and what is the key motivator for change. Take steps to be proactive, research people's attitudes and needs so that solutions to potential resistance are available before resistance arises. Even when this has been done people can still resist. Our approach in this instance is again to get to the root of the issue that is causing concerns, allow it be expressed and so that the steps for how to proceed can be identified. From this we can then come up with solutions and strategies that ensure the process of change that takes place, has increased commitment and effectiveness.