

# Driving for change: managing resistance



**Philip Atkinson**

During periods of change, the coach managers may need to inform and reassure in the face of fear and uncertainty.

A big issue in driving change in organisations is dealing with and managing the resistance you will encounter. Whether the initiative is focused upon coaching a new leadership culture or promoting new behaviours in customer relationship management, the problems encountered will be similar. It is unusual for any change not to attract some resistance. Even with foresight, pre-planning and all the apparent logic behind the need to change, you should expect some resistance as the norm. Recognise and welcome it as a healthy response and an opportunity to debate possibilities openly, and treat resistance as a powerful ally in facilitating the learning process.

The nature of resistance is that, generally speaking, we do not experience it actively and publicly. Its presence is often displayed covertly, even passively. If resistance were displayed in a very forthright manner, we could deal with it logically, in the same way as we would deal with objections. But resistance often shows up in

different and unexpected ways. You may have many staff attending a change project who are making all the right approving noises; but underneath this exterior other forces, motivations, doubts and anxieties may be at work.

## Understand and reframe resistance as learning

When we think of resistance, we may think of a force acting against us with a less than positive intent. Resistance persists for a variety of reasons, only one of which is negative in its intent. Reframing the concept of resistance as ‘natural’ is a good way of looking at it. Consider resistance as a form for good, because if you can predict how people will resist the flow of your good ideas from theory to practice, then you may be in the process of formulating a blueprint for change and learning.

## Objection handling

When dealing with someone who resists your approach, first elicit their reason for doing so. Then

diligently list the objections. Consider even the apparently illogical arguments because that’s where false assumptions, expectations and the company grapevine have been at work in opposing the change. Gossip, assumptions and fear spark the grapevine to create unrealistic scenarios that, when tackled head on, can be shown to have no substance. Letting the grapevine persist in creating negative rumours without challenge is tantamount to supporting it, so take action.

### Key learning points

- ◆ Being able to predict how people will resist change will allow you to formulate a blueprint for change and learning.
- ◆ Challenge assumptions – they may well have no substance.
- ◆ Communicate the changes that will take place and the effects they will have.
- ◆ Change causes an inevitable alteration to the status quo. If there is bad news to deliver, be candid.

### Symptoms of resistance

Listing and addressing the key examples of resistance is the first step in developing a coherent strategy to sell the benefits of the change. Some examples of resistance are noted below. What action would you take to address these?

- Fear in many formats, displayed sometimes as ‘defence mechanisms’:
  - absence – physical or psychological;
  - withdrawal;
  - aggression – informal personal actions;
  - regression – moving backwards in learning;
  - projection – blaming others and failing to take any responsibility.
- Perceived loss of control of self, future and the change itself.
- Redundancy and loss of status.
- Personal uncertainty about living up to the challenge of change.
- Concern that investigating current performance and practice may expose people’s abilities and competence.
- It may mean more work.
- It may require us to move outside a personal comfort zone.
- What happens if we cannot adapt to the change?
- Past resentments with the organisation or with key people or departments.
- Flavour of the month – staff believing the organisation is tinkering at the edges rather than fully committing to the change.
- History – a persistent record of failure in promoting change.
- If I ignore it, it may go away or not impact upon me and my team.
- Unwilling to take personal responsibility to help shape the change.
- It is not my responsibility to manage change.
- If you change first, then I will.

### Top tip

#### Don’t make promises: mergers and acquisitions

Some time ago, I was working with a client in financial services who had acquired another business. We were in the process of post-acquisition integration. We were making every attempt to bring the two businesses together. A major problem arose when we found several management groups from the acquired business ‘pouring oil on troubled waters’ within their own divisions. They clearly had little idea about how the integration would progress, but were busily telling people that jobs would not change, there would be no redundancies, and so on. They were laying the foundations for major conflicts. In a situation in which changes are breaking faster than a news story on TV, managers cannot afford to develop unrealistic feel-good communications without any substance. It is much better to tell people that decisions still have to be made than to invent untruths. This behaviour is evident in many organisations undergoing change, even though it is much better to be honest, admitting ‘We don’t have all the answers just yet – but when we do we’ll brief you on options.’ It is much better to treat people as adults than to adopt feel-good tactics for the short term, simply because that makes management more comfortable.

*‘resistance often shows up in different and unexpected ways’*

### Summary

Change is never an easy process to master. If it were, we would be introducing change programmes at an even faster rate than we currently are. But change will never work unless we confront the reasons why other people fail to see

its benefits. By addressing these issues in advance of rolling out a change initiative, the coach or facilitator will be in a much stronger position to be able to win active support for the change. Investing in prevention is the best clue to managing resistance, for what people resist persists.

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## Some resistance to even the most logical change is the norm

Action requires creativity and logical thinking. Formulate a response to counter every objection you have identified. If you are to be a really great coach or change agent, it is wise to sell benefits that support your point of view on both the personal level and the organisational level.

### **Influence and persuasion rather than control**

The problem with this approach to objection handling is that working out complex plans to counter potential arguments or viewpoints is time and resource hungry. But failing to do so leaves you, the coach or change maker, in a very weak position and in danger of failing to sell your message. This is where the role of coach or facilitator comes into play. The really effective change maker will rely on a barrage of influencing strategies and techniques, not to 'win the war' or argument, but to help others – learners and participants – to reframe things in order to see beyond their

relatively negative viewpoint. The coach therefore opens up opportunities for perceiving possibilities for those undertaking the change, attending workshops or being exposed to new behaviours and cultures.

### **Resistance at individual and organisational levels**

To understand resistance fully, forget about the complexity of organisational change for just a second. Focus on personal change and how you deal with it as an individual. Consider the resistance we all encounter when we try to change something about self – whether changing lifestyle habits, changing our career or direction, moving jobs, starting or ending a relationship and so on. Consider the relative success of our New Year resolutions as an indication of how each of us resists change. It is relatively easy to change our eating habits, lace up the running shoes, take the first few steps to

health, or even to commit to a new relationship or career or job. It is not so easy to deal with the dynamics of personal change. Gaining the pleasure of changing to be, do or have something else is countered by the pain of leaving behind our old self. Intellectually, the pain of rejecting old habits – which may have given us enormous satisfaction in the past – may not be compensated for by the pleasure of changing to new habits. Some people just find it too hard – which is why New Year gym usage declines in the early months of spring, and why most diets don't work. Using personal examples of experiencing difficulty or resisting change is a very powerful process in helping

understand why others, in the context of organisational change, find the transition so difficult.

### **Resistance and organisational change**

Recognising that resistance (or its reframed meaning of 'learning') is natural helps us all counter the resistance we may face when working through change in our businesses. A major element to consider in organisational resistance is countering those who see resistance only as a negative response to change. I, instead, prefer to see it as the normal default response. In the absence of really positive benefits accruing to the organisation and the individual from the proposed changes, the default response is reasonable. People need time to think things through, and much of their thinking and feeling is based on their personal interpretation of past history and how changes have impacted on them and others. They will compare the relative success and failure of other initiatives they have

experienced, and make their own decisions on any current initiatives on the basis of those experiences. Their assessment is linked to their perception of reality. As coach, you have to influence and persuade them otherwise. It is useful, when composing our lists of objections to the change, to outline also how we will respond with tangible benefits that will accrue owing to the change.

### **Resistance**

In order to facilitate any transition, we must examine the reasons why people resist change. Let us explore just some of these and suggest possible solutions.

### **Fear**

The first reaction when people hear of an imminent change is to personalise it to self and ask, 'How is this going to affect me?' Unsubstantiated rumours, which are neither confirmed nor rejected, add to a situation in which the worst possible scenario is perceived. Simply by talking with people about the likely outcomes and benefits that will accrue in tangible terms from the change is sufficient to ease people into a more accepting emotional state.

This indicates that we can learn a great deal about how we communicate with people and the messages we send to them. We must remember that 'Communication is what is received – not what is being sent.' We need to communicate the same message to various constituencies, with different needs and concerns, without deviation and in a consistent manner. We have to develop sophisticated communication strategies and processes to ensure that we can communicate specifically to hit the 'hot buttons' of different groupings

*'open up on opportunities for perceiving possibilities for those undertaking the change'*

within the business, dealing honestly with the issues.

### **It may mean more work**

Initially, it most certainly will mean more work. Do not minimise this. Companies do not become world leaders, renowned for their performance, without a great deal of expenditure of effort from their staff. There may be times when there appears to be some backsliding. For every two steps forward, you may move back two and a half. If organisational change was easy, organisations would have committed to it years ago – so don't build up unrealistic expectations. Energy and effort have to be expended to make things better in the long run.

### **Perceived loss of control**

When change comes about, there may be a perceived loss of control. Prior to changes, people perceive that they have some security in what they do and how they manage their jobs and their affairs. Change threatens all that. Change does mean doing things differently, creating new ways of working which will have to be learned and applied. It is to be expected, and is not unusual, that some people will be concerned; most of us seek security and predictability in our work. Very few of us crave uncertainty and chaos.

When driving change, what we need to do is to specify what changes will take place and how these will impact upon work and staff. Even if we don't know the full extent of changes over time, or have all the answers, we should not hold back from communicating. By doing this in advance of any meeting, we can help others take control of the change by explaining how the transition can become seamless and a positive challenge. However, we also need to be candid. If bad news has to be delivered, we should be honest and express the reality of the situation. It is pointless to make promises upon which you cannot deliver.

### **Personal uncertainty**

This is best summarised as 'Can I live up to the expectations of others? Am I competent to do the new things?' Here the anxiety is internalised. Staff are exposed to new ways of working, and they hear of improved performance which they believe will be difficult to achieve. They may also be ill at ease with the terminology they hear from others – such as 'Managers have to be coaches and leaders', 'We will all be empowered as cross-functional teams', or 'We will all work in self-directed teams.' The jargon permeates and fuels the anxieties of people about whether they can make the personal transition.

The solution is to inform: about how long the change will take, the likely consequences, the gap between present performance and future expectations, and the actions the organisation is taking to help staff at all levels to rise up the learning curve. Above all, gradual change is an important factor which must be reinforced. People cannot change in a day – so why frighten them into believing that they need to?