Pushback forces you to do a better job of selling and implementing new ideas.

When embarking on major change transformation within organizations, experienced change managers perform a key activity: coaching senior leaders on how to recognize and manage employee resistance. We preach that resistance is an expected outcome of change. We discuss the theory related to human behavior, the physiology of change and the difficulty encountered when we attempt to move people out of their comfort zones. We conduct training and countless hours of one-on-one coaching for managers to improve their competencies in dealing with this expected resistance. In the process, we often see and hear evidence of previous change transformations that failed because of employee resistance. That's unfortunate. Resistance to change can be leveraged for the good. Here's how…

Utopia is for dreamers

Some might wish for a utopian change transformation where no resistance exists: All change would be fully and universally embraced and people would freely move into a new way of being simply in response to a leader's request. In this wonderful world, flowers bloom, birds chirp and change is a natural way of life. What could possibly be the downside?

While great ideas would be smoothly assimilated into the non-resistant organization, so would bad ideas. Oops!

Employee resistance to change can actually help prevent bad ideas from being implemented. This expected resistance causes us to deploy a strategy for obtaining the type of buy-in that will get our good ideas implemented. Thus, we should appreciate when employees push back against our initiatives, as this forces us to:

- Justify why change is necessary
- Slow down, prioritize, strategize and create supporting plans
- Involve employees, listen and gather feedback

Justify why change is necessary…
Many people resist change because they don't know why they are being asked to change. Thus, we must answer the question, "Why is the change necessary?" Resistance to change forces us to justify to the workforce why we are changing. Leaders must ensure that their ideas creating the change will actually enhance the organization. Assuming the organization has a vision of where they are going, does this change align with and help achieve the vision of the organization?

A good reason "why" should be supported by establishing a business case for change. Otherwise, why should we embark on it? Does the change make financial sense? Does the change make sense in the short-term or is this a long-term plan? Once this financial justification is clearly established and understood, we must be ready to answer the next question. How will this benefit the individual employee?

When changes occur, there is fear of the unknown. Employees will immediately wonder if their needs will still be met. Some of the typical fears include job loss, loss of power or influence, loss of prestige, reduced overtime, increased hours or more productivity. When we implement major change the justification must be translated to employees in the context of "what's in it for me" (WIIFM). We must make this translation because this is what they will be listening for. But, while leaders think that they can define the pros and cons at a personal level, they cannot. Only the individual employee can tell you the pros and cons of how a change will affect them. Resistance forces leaders to find out how the change will impact people. This can only be accomplished by communicating directly with employees early and often.

Slow down, prioritize, strategize and create supporting plans…
Resistance to change forces us to slow down a bit and take the time needed to create comprehensive plans. Project mangers know that their project's success and failure are separated by risk. A detailed risk plan must be created to mitigate project risks. This plan

includes items like resources, funding, timelines and coordination. Project risks associated with the people side of change must also be considered. Risks must be analyzed and change-management plans created—*including a communication plan, plans to help our sponsors and managers and a reinforcement plan.*

- **Risk analysis**

The people side of change can be seen as a risk to our project objectives. When evaluating the risk to our project we must look at the size and scope of the change as well as the specific characteristics of the organization related to change. How big is the change? Does it change one group or everyone? Is everyone affected the same way or is the change different for each individual group? Is the organization saturated with many changes all happening at the same time? Are resources even available to make this change happen? Does the organization have a history of failed changes often referred to as “flavor of the month” syndrome?

- **Communication plans**

Justifying the what, why, and WIIFM is usually accomplished through the communications plan. The plan should be crafted to address the needs of all affected groups throughout all aspects of the project. Communication is constantly referred to as one of the things we can do better. This gap and its associated negative effect are magnified during events causing major change. When resistance to change forces us to create plans and communicate with our employees, it reinforces the benefits of good communication. These lessons learned can be carried over and applied to how we communicate daily with our people.

- **Coaching plans for sponsors and managers**

One of the worst assumptions that change managers can make is to assume that sponsors and managers know exactly what is expected of them during a transformation. Coaching plans should be developed to assist these key roles in executing the activities necessary to be successful. We ask sponsors to lead from the front, build coalitions of people to guide the initiative and communicate key messages. We ask managers to work directly with the people who are changing and provide two-way communication, manage resistance, lead by example, connect the project to the people, and coach people through change, as well as make the change themselves.

- **Reinforcement plans**

As we encounter resistance and take people out of their comfort zone, how do we keep them there? We must have a plan in place to reinforce those new behaviors or they will revert to the old behaviors. From the "Plan-Do-Check-Act” model, this is a “check.” We must check that the new behaviors are in plans and coordinate this “check” function with incentives and rewards. These can range from a simple pat on the back to celebratory dinners, to bonuses, to promotions. Creating reinforcement plans for major change often forces organizations to evaluate the effectiveness of their current reward and recognition programs to ensure that the correct behaviors are being reinforced.

Involve employees, listen and gather feedback…

While many leaders may have some great ideas, they may not always be the best solution. When we get different points of view we come up with a better solution. Getting employees

involved early in the process fosters better solutions. The ideas become “ours” or “the team's”—*not*
“
management’s.
” This generates ownership and ownership minimizes resistance. One of the greatest benefits to involving our employees in designing solutions is that it further enhances their skills and abilities in continuous improvement. This makes them more valuable employees.

We all need to listen more. When we attempt to jointly develop solutions, our employees will tell us what is working and what isn’t. Listening provides us with feedback on whether the implemented changes are generating the results and associated return we expected. Resistance generates communication content. Listening for symptoms of resistance will allow us to check if we are trying to implement a good idea or a bad idea.

Embrace the pushback

Resistance to change is a normal human response. Employees immediately seek to translate the change into a personal context—*which can be magnified by fear of the unknown.* When organizations have to address the WIIFM question with the workforce, it forces leaders to justify the reason for change. Addressing the reasons for change and involving the workforce in crafting solutions creates the best ideas and helps prevent bad ideas from being implemented.

So go ahead and prepare for your next change transformation. Anticipate the expected resistance it will bring. And when you see evidence of employee resistance actually appear, just smile. Because now you know that resistance to change is a good thing. And it’s something that should not be feared. It should be embraced. **MT**

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