

Resistance to Change

Practice Guide



Change occurs in all organisations, so successful leaders and managers need to master the skill of leading and managing change, including being able to recognise and manage resistance to change.

Resistance to change is the response that many employees have when managers introduce change. While change can be an exciting opportunity for some, it can be a time of loss, disruption or threat for others. This is why change and resistance often go hand in hand. Resistance is the most common issue that managers encounter when implementing change and the problem that causes them the most frustration.

What is resistance to change?

Resistance has been described as a form of conflict and the emotional response individuals make when defending the status quo or resisting inequality, power and control. It is often considered a negative and troublesome attitude, which is why many managers work hard to reduce or avoid resistance.

It is worth noting, however, that some resistance to change is good as there is a positive side to resistance. Resistance is a good warning system that there is a problem – it can expose bad ideas and give people an opportunity to express their opinions and emotions. Resistance can alert you to the fact that someone is not happy with the change and it can identify anyone who needs more support or information.

Despite some resistance being positive and necessary, resistance to change is usually considered the main reason why change initiatives fail. Resistance is considered a phenomenon that affects the change process, delaying or slowing down its beginning, obstructing or hindering its implementation, and increasing its costs. It can influence employee attitudes and performance and has been known to lower employees' job satisfaction and productivity.

Common reasons for resistance to change

There is no denying that change impacts people's lives. For some people change is merely an inconvenience, but many people feel a sense of loss or grief and in some cases change can be a significant and traumatic experience. There can be one or many reasons that compound to make people feel frustrated, complacent or angry. Here are a few common reasons:

- The purpose of change is not clear
- Fear of the unknown and what the change will mean for them
- Lack of trust in the leaders or management implementing the change
- Lack of support from management
- A poorly managed change process
- No buy-in, not being part of the decision to make the change
- The risks seem to outweigh the benefits
- Misunderstandings about the need for change
- Lack of confidence to implement the change
- Stress and feeling overwhelmed by continuous change
- A poor communication strategy leading to employees feeling confused or anxious
- The change being inconsistent with employees' values
- The disruption to social relationships and/or power.

This suggests that often it is not the change itself that people fear or resist, it's the organisation's culture, management practices or the process by which change is communicated or introduced.

It could be said that if you think people should be happy about change and they are not, then

- 1 They have a different perspective to you – see things differently;

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- 2 They have different information to you – and you need to increase or change your communication strategy; or
- 3 The organisation's culture, systems or processes are not conducive to change.

Signs of resistance

Resistance can be observed on an individual, team or organisational level, and it can be expressed in many different ways by employees or other stakeholders who are being affected by the change.

Whenever you are introducing change you should ideally be consulting with your employees regularly to try and get honest feedback about how people are coping and adapting to the change. However, if this isn't happening, or people are not being honest, then you should be on the lookout for signs that people are having physical or emotional responses that might indicate their resistance to the change. Some signs that might (but don't necessarily) mean people are passively or actively resisting are:

The costs of resistance to change

How resistance to change is managed can have a huge difference on your organisation's ability to survive. If not managed effectively, it can have an enormous emotional and financial cost due to employee disengagement, turnover and conflict. Resistance to change can lead to lower productivity, teamwork and morale, and poor decision making and customer service.

Given these risks and consequences, it is important to plan for resistance and then acknowledge and deal with resistance when it occurs.

Managing resistance to change

Please contact me to learn how to reduce resistance to change in your organisation. You can also read the following practice guides, which are available on my website, for more information.

- Leading Change
- Managing Change

Examples of passive resistance

Unexplained illnesses and increased absenteeism
 Breakdowns in communication or conflict
 Low productivity or morale
 Gossiping and spreading rumours
 Being non-committal/silent
 Lack of initiative
 Lack of problem-solving
 Focussing on other things
 Not raising problems/issues
 Delaying actions

Examples of active resistance

Making complaints
 Non-attendance at meetings
 Openly challenging decisions
 Distorting/lying
 Sabotaging
 Planned protests
 Aggressive behaviour
 Ridiculing
 Arguing
 Refusal to listen/act

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