

WHY DO EMPLOYEES RESIST CHANGE?

By Preston Ingalls

How often has an improvement been introduced at an organization, only to falter later? Trying to understand why people resist change, even when that change is obviously good for them, can be bewildering and frustrating. The underlying principle for resistance is often quite simple, as people justify their resistance to themselves. To overcome resistance to change, one must understand its origin.

For example, what if a manager decided to implement an operator care program where the operators would assume some basic care of the equipment? It needs to be more formalized than previous efforts. The following are nine reasons why change is resisted within organizations:

1. Fear of the unknown. Change is defined as causing to be different.

This implies vagueness, and vagueness causes discomfort and apprehension. The confusion and lack of clarity may often create worry and concern, which scares people. Pushing back against the new change is a means for coping with this fear. The attitude is, "I didn't have to do this before, so why are you asking me to do it now?"

2. The need for security. As humans, we require a certain level of security and predictability. After all, it is comforting to know that tomorrow looks much like today and yesterday. When that security or control is challenged, it may present risks that could lead to loss. The longer we have been doing the same activities, the more invested and reliant we are in the security and certainty. Change may appear more as a threat, and less as an invitation. People can retain some control of their security if they resist efforts to change.

3. Fear of failure. The new state may demand skills and knowledge that could appear to be beyond people's reach. When presented with a challenge to their abilities and the possible loss of status or job due to that failure, resistance may be inevitable. People want to be successful at what they do, and the longer they have been doing certain activities, the less comfortable they are at embracing new skills. If things remain the same, there is less likelihood they will appear as a failure, allowing them to save face.

4. Lack of trust. If an employee has been suspicious of a manager in the past due to that manager's actions or inactions, the employee is less likely to embrace the new vision as to where the company needs to go. If an employee is embarking on a risky journey and does not trust his or her manager's abilities or motives, the employee is less likely to follow. If employees are being asked to risk much, like troops in combat, they need to feel that their manager has their best interests in mind. If they do not feel that way, they may set anchor and push back. What are the real motives here?

5. Employees don't see the benefit.

If the change has little to do with the employees or if the benefits are for others or more for the organization, they may not see the value of making the change. Employees must see a benefit to themselves to take the risk and make the investment in this new state. People respond best to their favorite radio station, WII-FM (What's In It For Me?). They need to see how the change is going to help them. They can see how it is going to help the company, but how will taking more care of this equipment help them?

6. Employees will have to leave their comfort zone. Many are afraid to pursue a new direction because it would force them to

leave their comfort zones. People enjoy the status quo, and it poses little risk to them. They have much invested here, and change seems to threaten that investment. An example would be people who use the slot machines in Las Vegas rather than learn how to play Black Jack, where the payout odds are much higher. They are comfortable and happy with what they know.

7. Employees disagree with the new direction. Employees may have false beliefs that everything is OK or the proposed new direction is not the right one. If they believe they are headed the wrong way, they are far less inclined to follow. If they are lost in the woods and are told they need to head toward the left, but their intuition tells them they should be heading toward the right, they will be opposed to moving to the left. For example, they may wonder, "Why are you asking us, as operators, to take care of the equipment? I thought that was the mechanic's job."



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8. It looks like more work. “We must do more with less” is a prevailing adage in today’s business world, yet that may not be appealing if employees are feeling overwhelmed with work. In some cases, people may feel lazy, apathetic, and unenthusiastic to assume more responsibilities and tasks.

Additional burden hardly seems like a reward for doing something new and different. Opposing this additional work seems to make sense. To employees, it just sounds like a lot of hard work.

9. Employees are confused as to where the company is heading.

To feel comfortable with the new direction, they need to have as much information and details as possible. Without that information, they feel lost. If they are rowing a boat at sea, they need to see the land or have a compass to give them direction.

Many change efforts fail due to poor information and lack of a clear plan as to how to get there. Employees may be struggling to figure out exactly what they are supposed to do and not do with this new change at their company.

PAVING THE WAY FOR CHANGE

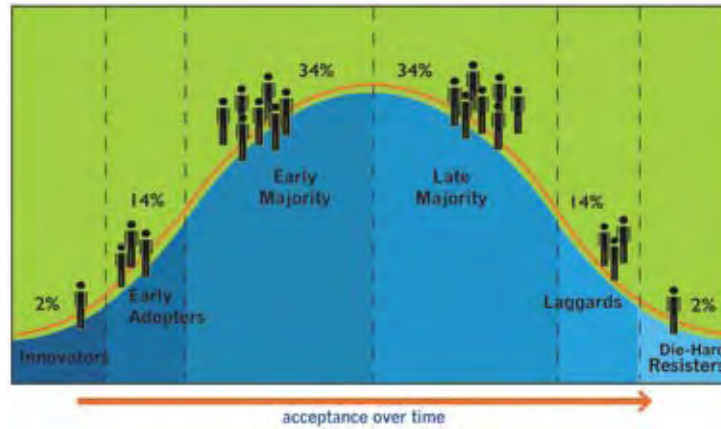
People will embrace change at different times based on their level of risk acceptance and how well the organization addresses these concerns. Logic alone is not sufficient to win most over to the new direction. Addressing their emotional concerns makes the change go down easier.

As Figure 1 illustrates, innovators clearly see the benefits to change, which appear to outweigh the risks, and are willing to move forward on good faith. The next group, early adopters, is less prone to risk but find it easier to view the benefits and, therefore, will move quickly once they see some evidence of the benefits. The early majority will see the risks and consequences as greater, will require more evidence of benefits, and will move slower. The late

majority is very risk averse and will need significant probing and constant pressure to accept the need to change.

Understanding resistance to change means understanding employees’ concerns. Do not expect them to enthusiastically embrace changes just because it would be great for the company. ♦

Figure 1



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