



Resistance is an integral part of change

By Judith H. Katz

People working for change in an organization are often alarmed when they encounter resistance. They see the need for change so clearly they cannot imagine any reasonable person feeling otherwise.

Sometimes they get angry and try to steam-roll the opposition. Sometimes they get defensive and retreat. Too often they label the resisters as disruptive and blame them for derailing a potentially beneficial change effort.

In reality, resistance is absolutely normal and to be expected. Instead of seeking to crush it or avoid it, the challenge for change agents is to accept and deal with resistance as an integral part of the change process.

Resistance can provide data vital to the success of the change effort about such things as: (1) additional areas that may need addressing, (2) groups of people who may be feeling excluded, (3) information that may have been inadequately communicated. Resistance can be used to inform the planning for what should happen next in the change process. And it offers the opportunity to inspire and engage previously untapped energy for building a more positive and productive workplace.

Prepare for resistance

In planning and implementing any change effort, I have found it critical to address the organization's expectations about resistance. Senior executives and other leaders of the change effort must be informed about what to expect and how best to respond to the various manifestations of resistance they will encounter. This may require education,

skill training, and ongoing coaching for the leaders.

Instead of avoiding or attempting to suppress conflict and disagreement, leaders will need to face resistance and reframe it as a tool for greater engagement and dialogue. In one organization involved in a diversity effort, the senior leader established a White Men's Round table to make sure that group's concerns were being heard and addressed in the organization's change strategies.

In another organization, the leaders called a meeting of all the people who may have thought they were in line for a promotion. At the meeting the attendees were informed of the organization's goals for building inclusion and leveraging diversity. They were asked to participate in determining the promotion criteria based on those goals.

Open communication about the change effort is vital in defusing potential sources of resistance. People must know why the change is taking place, what will be expected of them, how they will be affected, and where their self-interest lies.

Resistance is often passive

In many organizations, people do not actively resist a change effort. They wait, quietly pursuing "business as usual," and hope the change effort simply blows over. Or they try to be "helpful" by pointing out every flaw, real or imagined, in the change strategy without offering any useful alternatives. Often, resistance takes the form of a widespread belief that things will never really change or that any change won't be enough.

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In one organization, a number of people complained about poor communication and a lack of information about the change process. Ironically, the information they "wanted" had been sent to them in memos, emails and the organization's newsletter. When told the information was readily available to them, their reply was, "Oh, I never read those things."

To overcome this kind of resistance, employ the three Cs: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate! Make managers responsible for informing their team members, make progress reports a regular part of staff meetings, make people accountable for staying informed. Spread the word about each step taken in the change effort, and celebrate each sign of success.

When things go beyond passive

In some organizations, reaction to changes in the workplace may include verbal and physical harassment, hostile graffiti on bathroom walls, obscene emails, and threats of harm. This is no longer resistance; this kind of behavior is *violence*. It needs to be identified as such and dealt with quickly and decisively. Violence is grounds for immediate dismissal and criminal prosecution.

"There are no resistant clients."

The greatest piece of advice I ever received about dealing with resistance came from a highly successful salesperson. He said, "There are no resistant

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clients. There are just some people who don't understand the benefits you are offering them. . . yet."

Connecting across the barrier of resistance is the key. To be successful in fostering change, we need to recognize that people's concerns are real to them. We must be willing to listen to those concerns, include them in the change strategies, and communicate the positive benefits the change offers to everyone. We must seek to find and engage both the organization's and the individuals' self-interest.

A major key to success is positioning the change effort as essential to organizational needs and goals. It must be clear to all the people of the organization, from top to bottom, that the change is necessary for the organization's survival and success.

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