



What You Need, Not What You Want (Part I)

Skills and Professional Development



Every day hundreds, if not thousands, of CEOs, managers, and others lead their organizations through change of some sort. Some of it organic, others have it forced upon them by market conditions or other external factors. Strong leaders understand that change is inevitable and find a way to work through the various stages of change to make the best of the situation they either find themselves in or have themselves created. Despite all that is known about change, leaders and organizations continue to have miserable success rates when it comes to managing change successfully. The question staring everyone in the face has to be — why?

While there are likely hundreds of general reasons efforts at change fail, and likely as many specific reasons as there are leaders attempting to implement change, one factor — resistance to change — stands out as a huge reason for the opposition leaders face. How leaders can better use the information they gather from those change recipients they perceive as resistant to improve the change process or the outcome of the process is the focus of this two-part series.

All too often resistance is seen in a negative light. Instead, if leaders choose to understand the emotions of those reluctant to accept change, and view their resistance as an opportunity to engage those who are affected by the change as information — a resource — they could avoid some of the pitfalls that result in upwards of 70 percent of change efforts failing.

While some change agents and managers seek to label resistance as the reason for the failure of their changes, others see resistance as something to manage, minimize, or eliminate. Another approach views resistance as actually helpful and as a tool that leaders can use to improve the change itself or the process for implementing the change, or where necessary, halt the change altogether.

Whether resistance is called resistance, reluctance, uncertainty, ambivalence, or some other term, it shows up in three major ways: what employees say, how they feel or think, and how they behave. Playing a part in employees' reactions is how the leader of the organization communicates the need for change, the process, organizational vision, expectations, and so on. Another aspect of communication involves the level of participation of those affected by the change. In other words, whether the communication is one-way, where the organization is simply communicating facts about an already decided plan, or whether it is two-way and allows employees to participate in the process and decision-making as the change is taking shape.

In general, the more involved those affected by change are in the decision making process, the more likely they will be prepared for and accepting of the coming change. When there is inadequate communication — whether in frequency, tenor, or content — the change effort is prone to result in behaviors that are interpreted as resistance.

Attitudes of resistance will be found in every change effort. The status quo or current state is known. However, change means uncertainty and uncertainty in many creates anxiety, and it is how leaders help people manage through the transition from the current state to the newly desired state that impacts the success of the change. Remember however, not every change is good change, and there is nothing wrong with a healthy dose of resistance to put the brakes on a change process to ensure that what is being considered is the best course of action.

Nothing is recognized as more important to influencing the attitudes of those affected by change as the communication that comes from leadership. Unfortunately for many leaders, even if they do everything right as it relates to communication during the planning, rollout, and implementation of the change initiative, their prior communication history or absence of trust may hamper any positives that may have resulted from good communication related specifically to the change.

Communication affects readiness or acceptance — and groundwork has to be laid long before change is planned. It is a function of how the leader operates on a day-to-day basis and whether employees trust leadership in times of certainty and without change. So, in paving the way for change recipients to be ready for change, the leader has to consider how it will move people through processing the information they will need to survive the transitions.

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