

6.1.9: Resistance to Change

Learning Objectives

- Discuss ways an organization can be resistant to change

There's no chance that the iPhone is going to get any significant market share.

— Steve Ballmer, Microsoft CEO, 2007

Contemplate that quote for a moment, and then decide for yourself how much resistance to change can cost an organization.

There are similar examples that are equally as hilarious. Henry Ford's lawyer told him that the automobile was a fad but the horse was here to stay. Movie mogul Darryl Zanuck tossed aside the idea of television, sharing his opinion that the world would tire of "staring at a plywood box." Their resistance to change may have proven a bit short-sighted.

Ultimately, change is stressful, and people avoid it because they want to avoid the pain, anguish, frustration and lack of confidence that goes along with it. Even a positive change, like a promotion, can be met with stress as the employee marches into their own new and uncharted territory. Even minor changes can require a brief adjustment period, but large-scale changes can take a long time to adjust to.

Resistance to change is as much an organizational and group issue as it is an individual issue.

Organizational Resistance



Organizational inertia is the tendency for an organization as a whole to resist change and want to maintain the status quo. Companies that suffer from inertia become inflexible and can't adapt to environmental or internal demands for change. Some of the signs that organizational inertia is in play are through internal power struggles, poor decision-making processes and bureaucratic organizational structures.

Organizational cultures and reward systems can foster resistance or acceptance of change. A culture that promotes high levels of trust and cooperation lays the foundation for employees and their acceptance and instigation of change. If employees are punished for honest mistakes, if new ideas aren't rewarded, and managers aren't

prepared for daily issues with proper training, then that organization is ripe for change resistance.

Timing of change can also play a role in organizational inertia. If the organization is still recovering from a large-scale change in organizational structure, that would not be the time to introduce a new information management system. Employees will be likely to resist the change and turmoil that goes along with a second change. Thinking about the order and timing of a planned change can help managers avoid employee resistance.

Group Resistance

We talked about groups in an earlier module, and we learned that when groups start to work well together, it's because they've established norms and cohesion. Central norms in a group can be difficult to change, because they involve the group's identity. Any change to them is likely to be resisted, as group members will work to protect each other and preserve the group. If a group is used to practicing centralized decision making and suddenly they've been told to use a decentralized style of decision making, they're likely to resist, because it goes against their norm.

Group cohesion can affect the acceptance of change. If a cohesive group has been disbanded in favor of a different kind of team structure, the group's desire to stick together may make them resistant to change. But just as group cohesion can work against change, it can also work for change. A cohesive group looking to implement change can typically overcome any one individual member's resistance to it.

Individual Resistance

People resist change because they fear the consequences. Change means learning new habits and facing new situations. Learning new skills comes with the uncertainty of being able to master those skills. It's easy to see why change can seem threatening.



Furthermore, if individuals sense that there will be economic insecurity or risk regarding the change, or if they don't trust management, this could further add to the resistance.

Sometimes, individual traits can make one change resistant. Culture, personality and prior experiences can contribute to one's level of acceptance where change is concerned.

Practice Question

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How to Encourage Change

That's a lot of resistance to change. If organizational inertia, group resistance and individual resistance can get in the way of initiating positive or necessary change, how can managers make sure that they minimize change resistance and do the right thing for the organization?



Here are some ideas and tactics that can help:

- **Education and communication.** If there is fear of the unknown, organizations shouldn't compound that with a lack of information. Face-to-face meetings, newsletters, and updates can often help reduce those fears. A disadvantage of this, though, is the ability to communicate to manage change effectively to large numbers of people.
- **Participation and involvement.** People who participate in change are less likely to resist it. Managers can involve employees in the change process, creating an ownership around it that minimizes resistance. The disadvantage of this approach is that it's somewhat time consuming and managers do have to relinquish some control over change implementation.
- **Facilitation and support.** Facilitation and support requires active listening and counseling. These methods can be highly effective when dealing with individual resistance, but are time consuming and run a high risk of failure.
- **Negotiation and agreement.** This approach recognizes the role and power of others in the success of the change effort. Trade-offs and incentives are offered in exchange for acceptance. This is a relatively easy way to deal with resistance but can be expensive and lead to more negotiation.
- **Manipulation and cooperation.** Changing employees focus and attention to other issues can be a quick and easy way to minimize resistance to change, but it can lead to mistrust and resentment on behalf of those manipulated.
- **Explicit and implicit coercion.** If there's no time and no choice, managers can rely on force to push past change. This method is quick and effective, but it doesn't build commitment.

Practice Question

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...essments/14006>

Managers can implement change successfully by using a combination of these methods. Understanding the source of resistance is helpful. But none of the solutions above deal with organizational inertia, which requires a broader set of organizational activities. We'll talk about that, but first, let's focus on models and processes for introducing planned change.

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