

# When Change Agents Manage Change

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Organizations face the need to implement changes to their processes, plans and strategies in order to meet the needs and expectations of a dynamic environment and adapt to a continuously competitive market. Organizational change is considered a driver to organizational success (Drucker, 1999[16]; Ford & Gioia, 2000)[24] and is explored in various research as a variable in creating organizational competitive advantage (Florida, 2005[20]; Friedman, 2005)[25]. However, studies by (Beer & Nohria, 2000[9]; Bibler, 1989)[10] show that one-third to two-thirds of major change initiatives fail. Other studies suggest higher failure rates that could reach up to 90% (Cope, 2003)[14]. Beer, Eisenstat and Spector (1990)[8] consider employee resistance as one of the main barriers to the successful implementation of organizational change. Employee resistance make it hard or even impossible for organizations to implement improvements, which could lead to weakening the organization (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 2008)[6]. On the other hand, employee resistance is seen as a critical factor to the ultimate success of change management (Ford, Ford & D'Amelio, 2008[23]; Waddell & Sohal, 1998)[39].

The purpose of this review paper is to help change agents manage employee resistance and achieve the required successful organizational change. This will be done by reviewing existing relevant literature that establishes an understanding to the concept of employee resistance, its causes, consequences and management.

## 2. DEFINITION AND CONCEPT OF EMPLOYEE RESISTANCE

Some researchers conceptualize employee resistance as a psychological phenomenon that resides in the change recipient (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999[21]; Hjelt & Bjork, 2006[27]; Zaltman & Duncan, 1977)[42]. Folger and Skarlicki (1999)[21] define employee resistance as an "employee behavior that seeks to challenge, disrupt, or invert prevailing assumptions, discourses, and power relations" (p. 36). Hjelt and Bjork (2006)[27] consider employee resistance a natural behavior of employees that delays, disrupts and refuses organizational change. Zaltman and Duncan (1977)[42] define employee resistance as any behavior with the intention of sustaining the status quo in the face of pressure to change the status quo.

Other researchers such as, Ford, Ford and McNamara (2002)[22] conceptualize employee resistance as a social phenomenon recognized through the interaction of employees and change agents within an organizational context. This implies that both employees and change agents may play part in creating employee resistance. (Bommer, Rich & Rubin, 2005[11]; Coetzee & Stanz, 2007)[13] emphasize that the actions and inactions of change agents play a big part in causing employee resistance.

## 3. CAUSES OF EMPLOYEE RESISTANCE

### 3.1 Resistance As A Natural In-Built Employee Behaviour

Schermerhorn (1989)[33], Aldag and Stearns (1991)[1], as well as Griffin (1993)[26] attribute employee resistance to uncertainty, threatened self-interests, perceptions different from employers' about necessity for and consequences of change, feelings of loss, and lack of tolerance. Dubrin and Ireland (1993)[17] attribute employee resistance to change to three main factors: employees' fear of poor outcomes, (such as earning less money, be personally inconvenienced, or require to perform more work), employees' fear of the unknown, and employees' realization of mistakes with change overlooked by change agents and their fear of resulting problems. Oreg (2006) [32] states that employees become complacent and attached to the past as it constitutes a comfort zone that is more secure, controlled and predictable while the future, to them, brings with it a sense of uncertainty, fear of the unknown, and lack of confidence in their own ability to adapt to the new circumstances. Therefore, employees perceive the change as an opportunity for managers to eliminate the need for their jobs. According to Coetzee and Stanz (2007)[13] employees resist change when they believe that the planned change doesn't make sense and when they are uncertain about the value it will bring to the organization. As a result, they show projection, acting out, isolation of affect, dissociation and denials (Bovey & Hede, 2001)[12].

### 3.2 Resistance Resulting From The Actions And Inactions Of Change Agents

Sometimes change agents fail to involve employees in the change process, and focus their attention only on showing employees their blunders and misunderstandings believed

to underlay their resistance (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008)[23], as a result employees feel disrespected, experience lack of confidence, and show resistance. A research by Dam, Oreg and Schyns (2008) on participative leadership emphasizes the advantages of employee participation and shows a positive relationship between participation and being more open to change. They find that most employees become more committed to perform certain changes when they participate in directing strategies, executing processes and systems because it gives them a sense of ownership and enhance their self-esteem.

A finding from a study by Allen, Jammieson, Bordia and Irmer (2007)[2] stresses the importance information quality plays in making employees more open to change. When change agents don't communicate clearly and effectively the needs, objectives, and nature of the change, the change becomes exposed to different interpretations and becomes unclear resulting in employee resistance.

Lack of trust between employees and change agents play a big role in producing employee resistance. According to Folger & Skarlicki (1999)[21] employees resist change when change agents break promises either before or during the change process. As a result, employees build a sense of unfairness, anger, lack of company loyalty, decreased commitment, lack of productivity, higher turnover and mistrust.

Employees resist change when agents misrepresent change by not managing the risks involved in the process and act over confident in selling the expected positive consequences of the change and under selling the negatives and possible risks resulting change outcomes that are different from the promised objectives Ford et al. (2008)[23]. Therefore, change agents lose credibility and employees lose trust in them and consequently resist the change.

Employees are resistant and less open to change when they experience an organizational climate that doesn't show concern for their health, safety, values, and performance recognition (Self, Armenakis & Schraeder, 2007)[35]. In other words, employees resist change when change agents don't put enough effort in establishing a positive organizational climate that addresses their health, safety, motivation, self-esteem, professional growth and training.

Moreover, employees resist change when change agents don't acknowledge and treat their cultural values and beliefs with respect which triggers negative emotions and moods (Smollan & Sayers, 2009)[36].

According to Ford et al. (2008)[23], change agents' interpretation and self-interest leads to labelling certain actions of employees as resistance. For example, it is possible that employees be in favor of change while behave in such a way that change agents identify as resistance, on the other hand it is possible that employees are not in favor of the change but show signs of acceptance and be regarded, by change agents, in favor of

the change. Therefore, employee resistance has become a product of the change agents' interpretation where they give themselves the right to label any disagreeable behavior by employees as resistance even if it is not harmful to the change in order to provide themselves with certain degree of freedom in the way they deal with employees and relate any unexpected change failure to them while presenting themselves as the undeserving victim of this irrational behavior (Ford et al. 2008)[23].

#### **4. The Management of Organizational Change**

Employee resistance can play a key role in the successful implementation of organizational change because it gives employees the opportunity to participate through their comments, complaints, criticisms, expertise as well as their technical, cultural, and general knowledge of the organization (Hartmann & Fischer, 2009). Ford, Ford and D'Amelio (2008) [15] see employee participation as an opportunity for change agents to re-examine the issues in hand, re-consider the changes proposed in more depth, explore and examine alternative strategies. Also, employee participation creates a climate that gives change agents the opportunity to clarify and further legitimize the change process, while give employees the opportunity to create understandings that contribute to their subsequent acceptance of the change (Barrett, Thomas & Hovecar, 1995).

Studies of issue selling (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998[5]; Dutton, Ashford, Wierba, O'Neill, & Hayes, 1997)[19] show that employee resistance can act as an alarm system that alerts change agents and top management about issues and systems that require further attention and review because they may be unsuitable or not properly planned, therefore they adjust the pace, scope of change and its implementation in order to avoid negative outcomes and help the organization sustain high levels of performance. In this case resistance becomes a critical source of innovation (Bovey & Hede, 2001)[12], energy (Thomas & Bennis, 1972)[38], creativity (Litterer, 1973)[30], and partnership (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003[28]; Kotter, 1995)[29]. On the other hand, when employees react to the change with prompt unthoughtful acceptance and support to the change process, they risk eroding this acceptance and support as change progresses, thus undermining its long-term viability (Duck, 2001)[18].

Therefore, rather than labelling employee resistance as irrational and acceptance as rational, change agents should consider employee resistance a sign of engagement, commitment, and a valuable source of feedback that improves the process and conduct of change (Amason, 1996[3]; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989)[34]. According to Wegener, Petty, Smoak and Fabrigar (2004)[40], change agents should consider the absence of resistance a sign of disengagement and future problems.

Change agents should approach change with objective rational means and unitary ends where they are seen as a

process that construct, select, evaluate, and implement courses of actions judged based on organizational criteria, that includes efficiency and effectiveness, as means to achieve shared goals (Thomas, 2003)[37]. This requires change agents to understand the psychology of employees, how and why they behave in a particular manner and under what circumstances, thus create a positive organizational climate that supports participation, effective communication, as well as trust and develop systems and processes to achieve goals for the interest of all stakeholders including employees. When change agents approach change with the objective of achieving shared ends, they are able to unite employees and increase the chances that ends can be achieved even if the means are subjectively rational (Thomas, 2003)[37]. Wissema (2000)[41] conclude in a number of case studies that employees are happy to accept change however, they aren't happy to be forced to change. He finds that one of the main factors to influence the extent of employee acceptance to change is the behavior of change agents.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Employee resistance is a total phenomenon that includes employees, change agents, and the organizational environment they operate within. Change agents can reduce employee resistance when they focus on building a positive organizational climate through employee participation, clear communication of information, respect to employees' cultural values and beliefs, and consideration to their health, safety, values, and performance recognition. However, when employee resistance exist, change agents should use it as a cautionary system that draws everyone's attention to aspects of change that may be inappropriate, not well thought through or inaccurate, thus encourage change agents to search for alternative methods for implementing the change. In all cases, change agents have a responsibility to manage the organizational change process to ensure its success.

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