

Resisting Change and the “Team Player”

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“My only problem is that I can’t get anybody to do what I want!” exclaimed a manager who had just been questioned by his boss for missing a deadline.

“In my last performance review, my boss said I wasn’t a ‘team player’ because I question and challenge too much,” said a participant in one of my workshops. “So now, I just shut up, even when I have information that could be helpful. I’m tired of being hammered for pushing back.”

These comments are common in organizations unless one takes the time to understand covert and overt forms of resistance from co-workers, specifically, its origins, its forms, and its attributes. This paper will also explore ways to channel unhealthy forms of resistance into useful forms of collaboration and cooperation.

Resistance exists within organizations, teams, civic groups, churches, and any other venue where people gather. Without resistance, clear communication, understanding, and group sustainability is impossible.

Resistance to Change

In an article for the Harvard Business Review in 1979, Kotter and Schlesinger listed the four most common reasons why people resist change:

1. A desire not to give up something of value
2. A misunderstanding of the change and its implications
3. A belief that the change does not make sense for the organization
4. A low tolerance for change

Kotter and Schlesinger’s research suggests that people resist change for various reasons. All but the last of these reasons give credence to the fact that there may be legitimate differences in the way various members of the organization see the same situation. Leaders who make the effort to understand the individual’s resistance not only help the individual learn about the proposed change, they help themselves by giving consideration to other perspectives.

In a 1976 article, D. Klein changed the pejorative term “resistor” to “defender”. This relabeling of the term casts a different connotation on the person in disagreement with the proposal for change. Klein goes on to provide three reasons why defenders are useful in resisting change:

1. They are sensitive to any indication that those seeking to produce change fail to understand or identify with the core values of the system they seek to influence.
2. They see consequences of the change that are unanticipated by the initiators and that may threaten the well being of the system.

3. They are especially apt to react to changes seen as reducing the integrity of the system; that is, they are sensitive to the importance of maintaining self-esteem, competence, and autonomy (emphasis is the authors).

When considered in this light, resistance is not just a barrier to be overcome; it is a creative force for managing a difficult world. While resisters may appear to the change initiator as being defensive, *“from the resisters perspective, their behavior may very appropriately be seen as healthy self-regulation, or at least protective reaction to potential damage to their integrity”* (Nevis, 1987).

If one examines closely the issue of personal integrity, we see how being a “team player” pits each of us in a tug-of-war (with us being the rope!) with the forces advocating change on one side and our belief that our concerns and values challenged by the proposed change are valid on the other. If two people can examine their differences openly and creatively, they may be able to examine the proposed change carefully and design alternatives that satisfy everyone’s concerns and objectives.

Resistance, Saying “No”, and Power

“Resistance” only has meaning when a power differential exists between two parties (i.e., individuals, teams, organizations, political units, countries, etc.). Saying “no” to those with more power than us is difficult, so most people tend to fall back on reactions that are labeled as resistance.

Saying “no” and resistance must be seen as different. When two people share power equally, saying “no” indicates a difference of interest or opinion. This sets the stage for “negotiation”. A simple example may be a couple that determines they will share power equally within their relationship. When a disagreement arises, the two people will make the effort and expend the time to “talk it over” and arrive at a consensus that each can support.

A “no” reaction usually has greater clarity than what some might perceive as manifestations of resistance. It is for this reason that the manager will hear few “no’s” to his or her change initiatives, but they may experience missed deadlines from subordinates (i.e., the “slow roll” response to task assignments) who normally are quite dependable. Other forms of covert resistive behavior may involve reduced interaction between colleagues, withholding critical information, or increased absenteeism. Overt forms of resistance may be gripe sessions, inappropriate and disruptive humor in meetings, side conversations, or open challenges. There also exists the old adage that when unwelcome change is thrust upon people, “They will wear you out, wait you out, or both,” before they commit to the change.

Conversely, if expressed openly, the “no” is much easier to address since opposition is put directly on the table for all to consider. Further, when organizations establish norms of behavior where “no” is seen as healthy rather than negative (and perhaps to be punished), healthy interaction is increased as the fear of retribution is reduced.

Negotiation is a behavior conducted by adults who disagree and attempt to reach common ground..

Origins of Unhealthy Resistance

Where do organizations develop the implicit norms (i.e., their implied, acceptable rules of behavior) that suggest to the organization's newcomers that saying "no" is unsafe? One possible cultural origin is to watch parents as they deal with their children. "No!" from a child is rarely seen by parents as anything other than a challenge to parental authority. Rather than see the "No!" as the child's learning how to express their viewpoint (i.e., the child's motivation), parents may see it as a direct challenge (i.e., the parent's fear). The resulting negative reaction from the parent confuses the child who, if very young, has no idea why Mommy or Daddy is so angry. But as they are sent to the corner, they do learn that saying "No!" can be dangerous when spoken to an authority figure.

In fact, many forms of resistant behavior take on the appearance of children in conflict suggesting a connection to that point in our lives we first learned alternatives to saying "No!" Subversion of meetings (i.e., late arrivals, early departures, lack of adequate preparation, side conversations, lack of active participation, etc.) is akin to the angry child picking up their ball and going home when things don't go their way.

But adults are not children and resist when treated as children.

When adults behave as children it is usually an automatic response to an authority figure—such as one's supervisor—acting like a parent. That parental dynamic is insulting and demeaning to adults and deepens the rift between two adult parties. It introduces a power differential into the relationship. It is also usually unintentional and unconscious on the part of *both* parties.

Similarly, only when managers see "No" as a legitimate expression of concern from another adult rather than a challenge of managerial authority from a subordinate, is a healthy exchange of viewpoints possible. Besides, a manager's organizational power is bestowed authority, not a divine right.

Of course, there are times when managers dictate changes that must be carried out regardless of the feelings of those who are tasked with executing the changes. Military commanders in the midst of battle don't have the luxury of time for dialogue and conversation. CEOs or project managers who are assigned the challenge of saving a failing organization or project may use draconian measures to pull their organization back from the brink of disaster. However, most of us encounter these situations infrequently so that these instances *must be the clear exception driven by the circumstances of the moment rather than the ongoing rule*. Unfortunately, given the increasing pressures of our work environments, the exceptions are becoming the rule.

Reframing Resistance

When we reframe resistance as a form of feedback, we open ourselves to the possibility of rehabilitating the resisting relationship and shifting it from a parent-child track to an

adult track. Adults prefer to share power. They prefer to be acknowledged and valued for their knowledge and their values. They prefer to simply say “no” when they feel strongly about a proposed change.

If one’s organizational role is clearly delineated, adults understand who is ultimately responsible and accountable for outcomes as a result of a decision. So, in many situations, while a colleague’s input is potentially valuable, the final decision must reside with the party who holds ultimate accountability. Thus, the true “team player” is the one who voices concerns even if those concerns are counter to the flow of the rest of the team including the team leader.

The Courage to Confront Resistance

Of course, exploring resistance may lead the change initiator to discover that their plan was flawed or flat out wrong. Facing that possibility takes courage.

Attempting to overpower, avoid, or eliminate resistance does not allow a full exploration of the issues be either the resistor or the change initiator. This is patronizing behavior and is not respectful of the integrity of either party. To “leap over” the resistance is to avoid the possibility of real insight or growth, and it precludes full ownership of the resistance. The outcome, then, is compliance, which may work within a coercive setting but is not a good, long-term, problem-solving, or educational model for the system involved.

One change theory (i.e., Gestalt) poses that a person or system cannot move from one state to another until the present state is fully experienced and accepted. In working with this theory, it means exploring fully the current state by those who populate the system undergoing examination and proposed change.

Based on this theory, sales training educates new salespeople in the skill of handling a buyer’s objections using the gestalt approach. The seller is trained to take the time to inquire deeply into the nature of the buyer’s resistance. Before the buyer can seriously consider making a purchase, that resistance must be fully explored. Only when *both* the buyer and seller elevate the buyer’s resistance to an adult-to-adult conversation where power is shared, can the seller begin to understand the buyer’s objections to buying. Only then can the joint process of selling/buying move forward. This process also builds a strong rapport between buyer and seller since the seller demonstrates respect for the buyer’s current *readiness* to buy.

In strategic planning sessions, participants are assembled and asked to conduct an analysis of the current organizational state. If the analysis is done successfully, the group’s resistance to considering change quickly fades as the group actually becomes eager to explore alternative future strategies that enable them to achieve a desired future state. As a group, they become amazingly *impatient* to see the changes brought about.

For managers attempting to initiate change this means first *exploring the current state* before working on all the reasons why a proposed change might be desirable. Further,

this cannot be done without momentarily slowing down the push toward the proposed outcome. Edwin Nevis in his book, *Organizational Consulting* (1986), writes, “Pushing for the outcome will only solidify the resistance by not allowing room for opposing forces to be balanced with joining forces. *The accountability-oriented, results-driven manager will have a hard time accepting this notion, but there is no other way to avoid the enlargement of the resistance that will follow from continued assaults on the integrity or self-esteem of the targets of change*” (emphasis the author’s).

In his book, *Why Leaders Can’t Lead* (1989), Warren Bennis, the Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Business Administration at USC and a specialist on leadership, comments about increasing intolerance and decreasing civility in our institutions of business and government. “What’s going on is that the people in charge, particularly in business and government, have imposed change rather than inspiring it. We have had far more bosses than leaders, and so, finally, everyone has decided to be his or her own boss. This has led to the primitive, litigious, adversarial society we currently live in.” Certainly, not much has changed in the years since Bennis published his thoughts.

While the approach of exploring resistance builds some time into the initial stages of the change process, it actually speeds up the process of execution since resistant energy may be converted to supportive energy. Conversely, managers who dismiss the time necessary to build understanding of the proposed change, will be “slow-rolled”, waited out, or worn out while they push for change that never completely materializes.