An Elaboration on the Ways of Overcoming Resistance to Change in an Organization

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ABSTRACT: Change happens every day in business and in our personal lives. The same person who adapts well to personal change may not adapt well to change in their professional life. As a leader, how do you overcome resistance to change with employees? I think it depends on the nature of the change. Changes that personally impact many employees, such as a downsizing, merger/acquisition, change in the top leadership…these are changes that have widespread implications. Other changes, such as a change in technology, direction of their department, change in their individual roles/responsibilities…these, I believe, are more easily handled. But the question ‘how to overcome resistance to change’ is not easy to answer regardless of the magnitude of the change. Truth is, change is difficult for many and there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Much resistance to change can be avoided if effective change management is applied on the project from the very beginning. While resistance is the normal human reaction in times of change, good change management can mitigate much of this resistance. Change management is not just a tool for managing resistance when it occurs; it is most effective as a tool for activating and engaging employees in a change. Capturing and leveraging the passion and positive emotion surrounding a change can many times prevent resistance from occurring—this is the power of utilizing structured change management from the initiation of a project. The present study constitutes a study of the ways to overcome resistance to change in on organizations.

KEYWORDS: Human Resource, Employment, Training, Leadership

1. INTRODUCTION

Employee resistance to change is a complex issue facing management in the complex and ever-evolving organization of today. The process of change is ubiquitous and employee...
resistance is a critically important contributor to the failure of many well-intend and well-conceived efforts to initiate change within the organization.

Resistance to change is often cited as a main factor contributing to these failures. Based on that we decided to analyze the concept of resistance, its sources and what can be done to cope with it. After reviewing the literature we found that most researchers consider it as an obstacle; however, we also found that resistance can offer benefits to the change process, such as addressing possible weaknesses or serving as a source of innovation. We described a model to diagnose resistance based on the equity theory with an empirical illustration included. In addition, to manage resistance properly we found that communication and participation are two methods that target numerous sources of resistance and make possible to harness its benefits.

Since change management is a broad topic it is difficult to cover in detail all the aspects embedded in this topic. Based on that, we have chosen to focus on resistance to change.

One of the reasons for this election is that resistance is accounted as one of main impediments for successful change implementation. [1] Additionally, organizations are ultimately composed by individuals. Without employees’ buy-in it is almost a utopia to implement change in organizations, therefore the importance of taking resistance to change seriously into account.

Existing literature about resistance to change can be divided into two different streams of thinking. On one hand, resistance is considered as a standard and even natural reaction to change. [2] In this respect, resistance has a negative connotation and is seen as something that should be overcome by managers in the process of change. Indeed, resistance to change has many manifestations that can hinder organizational goals such as lack of cooperation, apathy, frustration, grievances or strikes. On the other hand, there are some authors who have gone beyond the negative effects that have been said about resistance and explain the positive aspects that this phenomenon may confer. Among the more significant contributions that resistance can offer to leaders is information about the aspects of the change process that need to be readdressed because they have not been properly defined.

The prevalence of change within organizations has provoked change management to become a hot topic generating multiple theories and discussions among scholars. Change management can be seen as “a systematic approach and application of knowledge, tools and resources to deal with change. Change management means defining and adopting corporate
strategies, structures, procedures and technologies to deal with changes in external conditions and the business environment”.

Resistance to change is a recurrent topic in the change management literature. We can find several definitions that help us to identify the main aspects related to this concept. For instance, Ansoff [3] chooses to define resistance referring to its consequences and states that resistance is “a multifaceted phenomenon, which introduces unanticipated delays, costs and instabilities into the process of a strategic change”. As we can see from the previous definition negative consequences are derived from resistance whose effects will impact the correct development of the change process.

For his part Zaltman and Duncan [4] argue that resistance is “any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo”. Status quo refers, according to the American Heritage Dictionary of idioms, as “the existing order of things, present customs, practices and power relations”.

In an organizational setting resistance is defined by Block [5] as “an expression of reservation which normally arises as a response or reaction to change”.

Resistance to change has long been recognized as a critically important factor that can influence the success of any organizational change effort. In this respect, research undertaken by Maurer [6] indicated that one-half to two-thirds of all major corporate change efforts fail and resistance is the “little-recognized but critically important contributor” to that failure.

All these descriptions about resistance to change seem to have a negative connotation which is predominant in the study of this concept. This perspective mostly sees resistance to change as an obstacle that goes hand in hand with every change process. Managers should be aware of this and try to eliminate it.

2. RESISTANCE TO CHANGE: CAUSES

It is difficult for organizations to avoid change, as new ideas promote growth for them and their members. Change occurs for many reasons such as new staff roles; increases or decreases in funding; acquisition of new technology; new missions, vision or goals; and to reach new members or clients. Changes can create new opportunities, but are often met with criticism from resistant individuals within the group.
2.1 Poor Communication

Changes within an organization start with key decision makers. It is up to them to pass along the details to team members and ensure all questions and complaints are handled before changes go into effect. Unfortunately, as news of a change spreads through the hierarchy, details are sometimes skewed and members end up receiving inaccurate, second-hand information. Poor communication can therefore cause resistance to change.

2.2 Self-Interest

Ego often interferes with the ability to adapt to change. Some want to maintain the status quo to better advance their own personal agendas; others have different motivations. In the end, employees acting in their own self-interest, instead of the organization's greater good, will resist change.

2.3 Feeling Excluded

Organizations often solicit advance input to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to voice their ideas and opinions. If, however, employees hear of a sudden change, and they had no input, they will feel excluded from the decision making process and perhaps offended.

2.4 Lack of Trust

Trust plays a big role in running a successful organization. When organization members feel they cannot trust each other or key decision makers, it becomes difficult for them to accept organizational changes. They may ascribe the changes to some negative underlying reason or even assume they will eventually lose their jobs.

2.5 Skills/Training Dearth

When change requires mastering new skills, resistance is likely, particularly when it comes to new technology. Organizations can prevent this through offering education and training. Four Strategies for Countering Resistance
3. FOUR STRATEGIES FOR COUNTERING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

The most important thing to know is not to label resistance as impediments or barriers. Cultural resistance is really a form of communication. Actions and words that indicate resistance are exposing people’s concerns. A leader’s role is to understand those concerns and take action to either solve the issue or demonstrate that the concerns are unfounded. Here are four strategies to help do those things.

1. Understand the resistance and its root cause. Think for a moment about reasons why anyone in a company would not embrace Lean Six Sigma. Truth is, if someone thinks engaging in the initiative is in their best interest, they will support it. People who do not are obviously responding to other cues from the work environment that make them think their best option is either to not support the initiative or to actively work against it. The leader’s job is to figure out what is shaping those perceptions.

Here are some of the typical forms of resistance – the reasons why someone would have a reaction that managers would interpret as resistance:

“This is just another ‘flavor of the month.’”
“I don’t have time…cannot free up resources.”
“This does not apply in my part of the business.”
“Is this just a way to cut headcount?”
“Is this incremental to my existing business plan?”

When considering the root causes behind these symptoms (see the table below), the negative reaction suddenly appears not only understandable, but like a perfectly reasonable path.

The company’s leadership team, therefore, must first talk to people throughout the company, all departments and all levels, and see which complaints or resistance behaviors are most often seen. Then discuss them as a team to identify the likely root cause. The leadership team may also want to do a postmortem on other initiatives in the company: Which ones succeeded, and why? Which did not, and why? That information is essential to help shape the appropriate response.

2. Act and/or communicate to address the root cause. Once the leadership understands the root causes of the resistance in the company, a plan of specific actions is needed to address each cause.
For example, one of the most commonly heard complaints is that people are already overloaded with work. In most cases, that is true. A company cannot expect fast, significant results through Lean Six Sigma if improvement work is loaded onto already overcrowded schedules. Ways to counteract this problem might include:

Demonstrate commitment. Dedicate those most responsible for Lean Six Sigma results (such as Black Belts and Champions) to the work full time. That will mean empowering managers to either distribute the original job responsibilities among other individuals and/or hire new people to take on the old work. These actions signal to everyone that the company is serious about achieving the targeted goals for the Lean Six Sigma initiative.

Identify and constantly reinforce corporate priorities. It is the role of the company’s leadership to help people allocate their time appropriately. For example, if it is a strategic priority to reduce lead time by 50 percent within the year, then efforts related to any other goal (such as reducing defects) should be put on the shelf if that work conflicts with cycle-time projects. In short, leaders need to learn to say no.

Build capacity/manage workloads. Do the people who may have to take on additional work have the training/skills to do that work well? If not, an investment in cross-training may need to be made. Establish a mechanism to provide early alerts if workloads are getting uneven and an individual or workgroup is in danger of falling behind on priority work. Monitor everyone affected by the additional work – including co-workers of team members who are expected to pick up new work.

3. Pay attention to the need to continue to act. As any experienced manager knows, resistance does not just disappear one day. Even though one problem may be solved, other conflicts or misunderstandings will inevitably arise that lead to future resistance. Be creative in finding ways to make sure that both managers and employees feel they can safely share their concerns with company leaders. In other words, they will not be subject to reprisals if they speak up. Minimally, company leaders should occasionally “walk the floor” to look middle managers, supervisors and employees in the eye and ask for their reaction to how things are going. They should do the same with any dedicated Lean Six Sigma personnel – ask them direct questions and be sure to follow up.

4. Provide mechanisms to continually engage the broader population in the change. The two most powerful weapons in the leadership team’s arsenal of culture change are 1) involving people directly in the new initiative and 2) creating a cadre of converts able to share their experiences with peers. As a company plans its initiative, therefore, it should build in
mechanisms that will expose people to either or both of these weapons. Provide as much Green Belt and Yellow Belt training as possible. All managers should be required to attend a one-day workshop that involves them in process change. Open team membership as much as possible without having unwieldy teams. Team members should be required to make presentations to their work group and management teams.

4. MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Employees’ resistance to change can arise because they do not fully understand the change and its implications. If they do not understand the need for change or interpret in a different way, the initiative resistance is likely to occur.

An example of misunderstanding is offered by Kotter & Schlesinger [7] which illustrates the importance of clarifying things so that they do not lead to different interpretations; therefore, highlighting the important role that communication plays in resistance to change.

In that case the president of a company decided to implement flexible working schedules for his employees in order to ease working conditions. Beforehand, the measure is meant to be beneficial for employees since with this system they have more freedom to choose when they want to work making easier to balance family life and work life.

The president was surprised when he knew that employees did not agree with the initiative.

In fact, they had talked to the local union about the change and after that handed in a nonnegotiable proposal to turn down the initiative.

The underlying problem was that none of the employees really knew what the term flexible working hours meant. The meaning attributed by the employees was that they could be asked to work whenever the supervisors wanted to. Therefore, they thought that they would have to work also in the evenings and week-ends if it was demanded by their superiors.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Organizational change is the movement of an organization away from its present state and toward some desired future state to increase its effectiveness. Why does an organization need
to change the way it performs its activities? The education environment is constantly changing, and the school organization must adapt to these forces in order to remain relevant and effective.

Forces for change are a recurring feature of school life. It is also inevitable that change will be resisted, at least to some extent by both school leaders and staff. There is a human tendency to resist change, because it forces people to adopt new ways of doing things. In order to cope with this recurring problem, school leaders must understand why people resist change. The most powerful impediments to change include uncertainty, concern over personal loss, group resistance, dependence, trust in administration, and awareness of weaknesses in the proposed change [8].

Organization members often resist change because of the uncertainty it creates, concern over personal loss, group norms, the need for dependence, trust in the leader, and awareness of weaknesses in the proposed change. Force-field analysis can help school leaders understand resistance to change. School leaders must encourage driving forces for change and reduce resisting forces to change. The change process also passes through three stages: refreezing, moving, and unfreezing. School leaders also can use specific tactics for overcoming resistance to change including education and communication, participation and involvement, facilitation and support, negotiation and agreement, manipulation and co-optation, and explicit and implicit coercion.

Change can be defined as doing something new or differently. By itself, change is neither inherently good nor bad. Any change will make people different from what they were before. There's no such thing as a change with a neutral impact: people will either be better or worse off because of it. Anyone suggesting change should always be aware of this. Although change can be evaluated by its consequences, it's impossible to know in advance how a change will turn out. After taking all the relevant factors into consideration, there are times when it's prudent not to change.

Similarly, there are other times when resistance is the best action. Unfortunately, the word resistance often has a negative connotation. This is a misconception.

Sometimes resistance is the most effective response. If people's beliefs, values and behaviors provide them with constructive ways of meeting needs, then it's adaptive and healthy to hold onto them, and resist change. Some changes could disrupt this process and cause the person to become disorganized and less productive. In these situations, it is in a person’s best interests to resist change.

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Thus, there are times when resistance is a problem and times when it's a solution. The focus of this article is on resistance which is considered a problem. We will now turn our attention to assessing this type of resistance. Finding the causes of resistance requires us to understand people's facts, beliefs and values. Since we can't literally see a person's facts, beliefs and values, the role they play in creating resistance can be difficult to isolate. Fortunately, we have a powerful source of information to help us with this task: observation of what people do and say.

REFERENCES