

Caution Ahead! Avoid These 5 Mistakes When Dealing With Resistance to Change

Posted by Paula Alsher

If your organization is implementing a change, whether it is transformational in scope or a minor procedural adjustment, you will face resistance. It's inevitable...someone, somewhere is going to let it be known they don't like what's happening.

Resistance is very simply someone's attempt to protect or defend his or her Frame of Reference. That's why the level of resistance is directly linked to the impact of the change from the individual and/or collective's point of view. The more disruptive a change is perceived to be, the greater the resistance you will face. It's predictable!

Here's the thing: comments and action or non-action that you confront as a Change Agent may actually be resistance. It can be subtle. For example, we have many clients who work in analytical, scientific cultures. The resistance will sound "analytical." You will hear things like, "We would like to move forward, but we need to have more details." The reality: you will never be able to provide the level of information they think they need. It's resistance!

Watch Out for These 5 Mistakes

In our 30+ years of global change management consulting, we've seen a lot of mistakes when it comes to managing resistance to change. We've listed below a few of the most common mistakes we've experienced, along with some tips and guidelines on how you can avoid making the same mistakes in your own organization.

1. Ignoring Resistance

Many leaders say they understand resistance is a natural part of the change process, but are still taken by surprise when they actually start to experience it. Their first reaction tends to be to ignore the resistance, rather than to manage it. The thought process is simple: maybe if I ignore it, it will just go away. But while that is tempting in the short-run, the end result is predictable; your change project ultimately will slow down, or you won't achieve sustained adoption and Return on Investment.

2. Trying to Eliminate Resistance

You will never combat, solve, or overcome resistance to change. Trust us. You just won't. That is why the question shouldn't be, "How can we eliminate resistance?" Instead, you need to ask, "How can we best identify where the resistance is coming from, and then how can we manage it so we don't slow down our change?"

TIP: When used appropriately, involvement can help to build commitment to the change, surface resistance and actually produce better solutions for your strategic investments.

Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/yc4hap56>

3. Attempting to Communicate Resistance Away

There is a common assumption that if you just tell people about the change, and tell them more often, you will eliminate resistance. But the truth of the matter is you will never eliminate resistance by simply piling on logical and rational explanations for why the change will be good for people. Unfortunately, people aren't motivated to adopt new cultures, systems and/or processes just because they are seen as "logical" from the 50,000 foot corporate perspective.

TIP: Every communication sent during any implementation must include a feedback loop in order to allow individuals to express their thoughts and feelings about the change. It's a perfect way for Change Agents to gather information about any potential sources of resistance.

4. Under-Estimating Resistance from Managers

One of the key principles in the Accelerating Implementation Methodology (AIM) is: You can expect the most resistance from those people who have the greatest vested interest in keeping things the same."

More often than not, these people are your middle to upper level managers! The reasoning is quite simple: Senior Managers, Directors and VP's were hired, and are successful at their jobs, because they fit into the organization's current culture. Culture is self-replicating, and self-reinforcing. So, what in the world would their motivation be to change?

TIP: Always treat managers as Targets first. Change Agents should not assume that managers are aligned with the change simply by virtue of their organizational position. Sponsors need to have the same two questions answered as any Target: What's this change mean to me, and what's in it for me? Once the answers to these questions have been provided, managers can begin to move from the Target role to the Sponsor role.

5. Checking Resistance Off of Your TO DO List

Managing resistance is not a one-time event. If resistance levels are, in fact, directly related to how disruptive the change is, it makes sense that the nature of the resistance and the amount of the resistance will vary as the disruption varies. This is why resistance management isn't as simple as just completing a checklist. It needs to be an ongoing Change Agent activity throughout the project lifecycle, even after a project is launched or goes live.

Resistance isn't logical, and it can't be wished away. You will never combat, solve or overcome resistance to change. Ironically, ignoring resistance, denying it exists, and trying to beat it down only serve to worsen the situation. Instead... here's our best advice... take the time to surface resistance, understand it, and then manage it. Invest in building readiness for change. When you do, your implementation can move forward at speed.