

MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN THROUGH MANAGING RESISTANCE



Also read:

Part 2: [Silence isn't always golden](#)

You recognise that sinking feeling. You're under pressure to drive better results with a team who are already stretched thin, and now you need to ask them to work in a different way.

Leading change can be an emotional minefield; managing those who resist change is one of your greatest challenges.

People resist change for all kinds of reasons. Humans instinctively crave stability, belonging and certainty. It helps us feel safe and secure in the world when we know our place in it, what's expected of us and how to respond.

The latest neuroscientific research suggests that uncertainty or volatility sets off an involuntary response most commonly associated with a physical threat – a fight or flight reaction. No wonder the mere suggestion of change brings out a subconscious response in your team to **“resist change at all costs and support the status quo!”**

This perfectly natural human response gives rise to various expressions of resistance within your team. As a change leader, it's critical to be able to identify and address these attitudes early and often during the change process.

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FIVE WAYS PEOPLE RESIST CHANGE

Part of managing resistance effectively is helping others get excited about change and become comfortable in a constantly disrupted environment. In order to do this, we need to understand how people perceive change and why they resist it. We can only counter people's anxieties and resistance if you fully understand where they come from.

To help you identify and address how resistance might manifest in your team, we're publishing a series of articles that explore each of these resistant attitudes in more detail.

In this series, we'll explore the different ways resistance to change may manifest in your team and provide scenarios to help you effectively navigate them.

We've identified five ways in which your team might react to change, indicating possible resistance:

1. Silence / non-responsiveness
2. Questioning
3. Stonewalling
4. Undermining
5. Avoiding

Each article will provide you with real life scenario to help you identify it more easily when confronted by that type of resistance. In each scenario, there will be a number of ways you might respond to your team member, we explore each of those and offer an alternative way to address each in a way that promotes the best results for your employees in assisting them to embrace the change.

We also delve into the important question: **"why people react the way they do"**.

GUIDING YOUR TEAMS FROM RESISTING TO EMBRACING CHANGE

Our Change Leadership series of articles will demonstrate how you can identify and overcome each type of resistance to change. While each article explores a single aspect of resistance, in reality we recommend taking an integrated approach to managing change.

By taking a deep and intimate approach to understanding our clients' worlds, we help leaders break down each of the resistance barriers so that they can effectively guide their teams towards embracing change.

We have had tremendous results with organisations who implement transformation projects within industries which typically favour inertia. Through our change leadership program, we use a holistic approach to identify roadblocks and foster collaboration, open communication and a willingness to see solutions through innovation and transformation.

**"Our only security is our
ability to change."
~ John Lilly**

If you'd like to develop your change leadership skills or find out more about managing resistance to change in your team, please contact:

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MANAGING RESISTANCE: SILENCE ISN'T ALWAYS GOLDEN

No one smiles, no one asks questions, no one says thank you, or congratulations. You spot someone in the corner of the room texting.

You think...

Immediately you get the distinct and immediate impression that your team doesn't understand, are disinterested, disengaged or just don't care. You feel frustrated, maybe even humiliated by the lack of reaction.

You are worried your change may fail due to your team displaying a lack of enthusiasm right from the outset. You are inwardly fuming, they don't even know about it fully yet, and they're already resisting. Don't they know how much work you've put into this project already?

Before you react: stop and consider... are you dealing with resistance? Have you validated your conclusion that the team is disinterested or disengaged?

Consider...

You may very well be correct in assuming your team is resisting your proposed change. While that may be true, you could react in one of two ways to this potential reality:

1. Entertain all kinds of stories internally about your team's reaction; or
2. Turn the blame on yourself immediately, starting on the script of "Bad Boss - The defining sequel."

The reality might be entirely different, and we suggest, rather than entertaining little scenarios in your own head, asking yourself a few questions about the team:

- ◀ Is my team quiet by nature or do they require some time to process information?
- ◀ How do they prefer information to be delivered - do they prefer reading detailed documents over face-to-face conversations?
- ◀ How approachable am I as a leader, especially in a team context? What alternative modes of communication can I investigate to get feedback?
- ◀ Is it just the end of a very long week, and are they just too tired to deal with 'yet another change'?

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TACTICS

It may be very possible you are encountering resistance to your change idea and its implementation.

By reframing your thinking in that moment of looking at a sea of quiet faces, you clear your mind of your perception of resistance. What's important now is to listen - be open to receiving the feedback or information your team is giving you.

The immediate response might be just to state out loud **"I can see everyone is taking a moment to think about it - that's great!"** Try not to announce plans to extract thoughts, to ensure your team feels comfortable enough to process thoughts and feelings. Consider leaving the room for a moment - use the excuse of needing a glass of water, or fetching something for the team to read.

There are some other tactics to then discover your team's responses in a non-confrontational way:

- ◀ Help your team help "think out loud" in the room by starting a discussion
- ◀ Determine the most effective way to encourage response either verbally or in writing, and how you will follow up with them
- ◀ Consider one-on-one conversations with a follow-up meeting to discuss feedback as a whole
- ◀ If your team is already suffering from change fatigue, consider ways to break the proposed change into smaller, more manageable mental tasks

We can help you manage resistance and become a more effective change leader. Get in touch with us regarding the Change Leadership Series.

In our next article, we'll consider how Resistance as Questioning may show up in your team, and some tactics that will help you address this.

MANAGING RESISTANCE: IS THERE SUCH A THING AS TOO MANY QUESTIONS?



Also read:

Intro: [Making change happen through managing resistance](#)

Part 1: [Silence isn't always golden](#)

In Part 3 of our series on [Managing Resistance](#), Ellie Pietsch explores how effective change leaders manage questioning as a form of resistance.

Enlisting the support of your team is critical to making change happen. Helping them adapt quickly means they will adopt the new reality more readily.

Speed is of the essence, because every moment they resist change, it means less energy they have to focus on creating the future you have envisioned.

Think of your challenge, as a change leader, as shifting this energy and focus your team is displaying as resistance into something constructive. This can only be done when you can readily anticipate, identify and manage the various types of resistance that may present during your change journey.

In our previous article we explored how to manage [silence](#) as a form of resistance. In this article we'll explore resistance as questioning.

Imagine...

You've identified a need to change to keep pace with competitors that are investing in new technologies, or perhaps the whole industry is being disrupted by external forces.

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MANAGING RESISTANCE: IS THERE SUCH A THING AS TOO MANY QUESTIONS?

In any case, you believe something needs to change. You're not exactly sure what this will mean, but you want your team to be involved in the process. You raise it during an informal conversation in your weekly meeting.

Immediately, you're met with a barrage of specific and detailed questions.

“When is this going to happen?”... “Who will lose their jobs?”... “Who ordered this change?”... “Who will oversee the project?”... “How much will it cost?”... “Why?”... “What authority do we have to do this?”... “Didn't we try this 5 years ago and fail?”

You think...

The immediate and relentless questioning can give the impression that people are on the front foot, attacking your idea. You may feel judged, and that your team is asking these questions to raise obstacles and avoid looking at the problem you've identified.

Your initial response may be to feel discouraged. After all, you were simply trying to engage them in the process and keep them informed. It can be disheartening to face questioning, as though your team has already decided your idea is not going to work.

Consider...

It boils down to your perceptions of resistance. Rightly or wrongly, you can draw the conclusions:

1. Questioning is an attack;
2. Your team is judging you; or
3. They are putting up barriers.

However, the reality may be different. Questions can often be a signal of a deeper curiosity or wanting a plan to succeed by looking at ways it may fail. Consider the following questions:

- ◀ Is your team naturally curious?
- ◀ Are they comfortable chatting with each other and brainstorming solutions?
- ◀ Do they enjoy the opportunity to thrash out a problem together?
- ◀ Have they been involved in other change projects in recent memory?
- ◀ How did these change projects go?

TACTICS

Perhaps this “resistance” is in fact the beginning of robust and rigorous debate that will help you understand the complexity of your change project and contemplate impacts that you weren't aware of.

It can be easy to judge others harshly when you feel under attack from a barrage of questions. However, the wise course of action is to take a beat to reframe your thoughts. This way, you can clear yourself of any knee jerk responses to the questions.

Taking a non-judgemental approach to each question can help your team redirect that initial energy of resistance towards the proposed change and reframe those challenges as obstacles they can help you to overcome.

MANAGING RESISTANCE: IS THERE SUCH A THING AS TOO MANY QUESTIONS?

There are a number of ways to help you pause in that moment and consider a few behavioural approaches that may help you respond to the questions:

- ◀ If they are driven by curiosity, rather than solution-oriented outcomes, consider revising the way you involve them, breaking it down into digestible pieces. Explain this meeting was to discuss the “big picture” and then only loop them in for changes to each part of the process.
- ◀ If they enjoy solving challenges as a group, setup a forum for in-depth discussion with regular touchpoints to ensure they are involved in each step of the change.
- ◀ If they have been involved in other change projects, consider the success of these. Your team could they actually be excited about the new idea, but just sceptical that this idea might never take off. A tactic for combatting this is to encourage further discussion on why past projects fail to give them confidence these will be addressed in any future change project.

We can help you manage resistance and become a more effective change leader. Get in touch with us regarding the Change Leadership Series.

In our next article we'll consider how Resistance as Stonewalling may show up in your team, and some tactics that will help you address this.

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MANAGING RESISTANCE: BREAKING THROUGH A DEFENSIVE BARRIER



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Emotions drive behaviour, and in the workplace it is crucial to understand and acknowledge the emotions that drive resistance to change. Therefore, a key trait of the successful change leader is a deliberate and conscious approach towards surfacing and then managing the emotions underpinning resistance in their team.

As you embark on your change journey, shift your focus from driving efficiency and instead be prepared to have the same conversation many times over. Become the champion for change on a repeat loop through open and honest conversations with your people – by doing so, you'll stay informed and maintain a better position to modify your change strategy in an agile manner, should the need arise.

By employing a consistent and constant message through a transparent forum that promotes two- way feedback, you can overcome the 'fight or flight' response as your team gets used to hearing about change being the "new normal." Making it part of your mantra is critical to removing your team's initial inertia and creating momentum.

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MANAGING RESISTANCE: BREAKING THROUGH A DEFENSIVE BARRIER

We have explored a few ways of managing resistance in this series – the first article spoke about managing resistance as [silence](#) , and in the second we identified resistance as [questioning](#). Today, let's explore resistance as stonewalling.

Imagine...

You formulate your change message, tailor it to your audience and deliver it perfectly. You involve your team in the process. Your translation of the change vision couldn't be more on point. You can see most of your team nodding along with you, which you interpret as tacit understanding and acceptance. Everyone's on the journey!

Then, you ask a team member, who we'll call John, to complete a task that will directly contribute towards the change program. He looks back at you blankly and replies: "The idea will never work. We tried it five years ago and it didn't work then. Nothing's changed, so why do you think it will work now?"

You think...

You may think "How gutless! Why didn't he speak up while we were talking about this as a group? Why is he deliberately stonewalling?" You may also interpret his blank expression and negative response as a sign to expect more of the same when asking your team to complete tasks that contribute to the change effort.

Stonewalling is one of the toughest responses to tackle without becoming defensive. Because John is actively resisting your idea by being deliberately difficult, it can summon an immediate desire to confront the overt negativity.

Consider...

While stonewalling may look aggressive, difficult or even childish from the outside, it feels very differently on the inside. The defensive stonewaller is simply trying to protect himself.

John may have experienced poor change management previously, where his effort and enthusiasm for the project went to waste. Consider his personality – for example, if John is a "details guy" he is someone who needs to personally understand all the reasoning behind the decision making, the facts, and figures. This personality type needs time to think things through before getting on board.

Perhaps John's stonewalling resistance is more about his lack of understanding – of the change required, the reasons behind it, the process to get there, or the specific tasks you're asking him to complete. By seeking to understand John's experiences and his concerns, you may be able to identify what else he needs to embrace your change fully.

TACTICS

Because defensive stonewalling comes from a place of intense and overwhelming feelings [the person is figuratively fleeing confrontation by shutting down], further conflict of any kind only exacerbates the situation. By confronting stonewalling directly, you are likely to invite more of the same; or more open aggression.

Instead, consider John's point of view. Many times people stonewall to avoid feeling inadequate – it might be worth your while to look for the motivation behind this type of resistance. The key to managing an avoidant response such as stonewalling is managing both the emotional side of change, as well as the practical elements. Here are some suggested tactics to help John feel less overwhelmed:

- ◀ Identify the source of discomfort – this could mean a separate conversation outside of the change project to drill down into areas of John's motivations and fears.

MANAGING RESISTANCE: BREAKING THROUGH A DEFENSIVE BARRIER

- ◀ “What is your understanding of the situation?”
- ◀ “What is most important to you in this situation?”
- ◀ “Can you tell me a bit more about...?”
- ◀ “What do you think a good outcome might look like?”
- ◀ “What are the obstacles to reaching that outcome?”
- ◀ “What would you like to see / what would you like to happen next?”
- ◀ Take a break if stonewalling starts again - either reschedule the conversation or move onto a more neutral topic.
- ◀ Listening, rather than directing, is an effective tool to guide John through his feelings of agitation over the impending change to ultimately understand the source of the resistance.
- ◀ Co-create a strategy or plan to mitigate the resistance and get John on board with the change.
- ◀ Regularly check in with John outside of scheduled meetings.

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