

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE IS NOT SUCH A BAD THING!



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By reducing duplication of effort, the design of a shared service will bring change. Dealing with resistance is cited as one of the most difficult tasks when managing change and particularly in the context of a shared service project.

This is a little depressing when one thinks about the volume of change that most managers deal with in any given year and the fact that, according to the CIPD¹, most change projects fail to meet their objectives.

It follows therefore that a failure to deal with resistance will mean a failure to deal with change.

Defining resistance...

Resistance is a difficult and at times unfathomable challenge and one that can include 'virtually every type of behavior ranging from a roll of the eyes to overt sabotage'².

Olivier³ provides a particularly stark view of those who resist change classifying them theatrically as 'naysayers', 'critics' and more extremely 'traitors'. The more covert the resistance, the harder the challenge and the more damaging the effect if not appropriately dealt with.

The need to find strategies for overcoming resistance is identified in many of the classic managing change models including Jaffe's four-stage process, the Kubler-Ross 'grieving' model and the 'transition' model as presented by Bridges and Mitchell.

¹ CIPD (2003) *Reorganising for success: CEO's and HR managers' perceptions*. London: CIPD

² Ford, J and Ford, L. (2010) 'Stop blaming resistance to change and start using it', *Organisational Dynamics*, 39(1)

³ Olivier, R (2001) *Inspirational Leadership, Henry V and the Muse of Fire*. London: The Industrial Society



Many of these models suggest that an understanding of the reasons for resistance will pave the way for an effective response.

Such reasons will classically include a failure by managers to articulate the 'burning platform' for change, the need to overcome an in-built fear of change (by those on the receiving end of change) and a clear disagreement with the need for change.

In the context of shared services, the fear of change is often driven by the threat of losing power and influence. As Barratt-Pugh⁴ indicates *'there is no such thing as a merger; only a partner with less power'*.

There are, however clear dangers of taking an overly simplistic and polarised view of resistance; distinguishing simply between managers who seek to *'do the right and proper thing'* and employees who *'throw up unreasonable obstacles and barriers.'*

The reality (as so often is the case) is in the middle.

⁴ Barratt-Pugh, L, Bahn, S and Gakere, E (2013) *Managers As Change Agents*, *Journal of Organisational Change Management*, 26(4)

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Ford and Ford⁵ advocate the real benefits of resistance, which if handled well can inform and shape successful change. They argue that resistance is feedback and, like all feedback, it is helpful in improving both the design and implementation of change.

In taking such an approach, resistance is used positively to energize the change process and acts as a stimulus for exposing and debating the key issues.

This is, in turn, helpful in giving a platform for such concerns (whether they be technical or social concerns) and ultimately a means of enriching the product through discussion and contribution.

Such an approach does, however, require a shift in the notion that most employees are hard-wired to resist change (Lewin and Gold)⁶ and a movement away from the tendency to sometimes blame resistance for the failure of change.

So resistance is a means for improvement, not a safety net for failure.

The approach also requires a shift in the perception that to 'engage openly' with resistance is a sign of weakness and a signal that there is faltering confidence in the change.

A different mindset is needed; one that is prepared to seek out resistance and deal with the issues that it brings. I have set out a number of ways this can be done in the box on the right.

⁵ Ford, J and Ford, L. (2010) *Stop blaming resistance to change and start using it*, *Organisational Dynamics*, 39(1)

⁶ As cited by Erwin, D and Garman, A (2010) *Resistance to organisational change*, *Leadership and Organisational Development Journal*, 31(2)

In essence, to engage in resistance as a way of bringing issues to the fore and have them debated and resolved. The change will often be enriched as part of the process and the covert critics will have little room to hide.

The most valuable form of resistance is that from employees who have a platform to speak and who are then able to engage in debate. The hardest form is that which lurks around the water cooler, or which basks in the comfort zone of silent umbrage.

Engaging openly with resistance will also serve to strengthen relationships far beyond the change process. It will help change agents to re-connect with the original vision for change and build trust and confidence with the recipients of change.

This in turn will help to build understanding, participation and engagement and ultimately successful change.

Five key elements in managing resistance to shared service change...

- Be open and honest with staff about the business case
- Don't be too precious too early about the 'change' solution
- Provide extensive opportunities for feedback and views
- Capture, embrace and debate the feedback
- Listening to and using the feedback is the best form of staff engagement