# Rethinking Resistance

## (S. Ramnarayan and Christian Harpelund)

In an engineering organization, the top-management had decided to change the way the company developed its new products. The company had constituted a New Product Development (NPD) team in each of its business divisions. The different business divisions were located in small towns across India. The NPD teams were assigned two major tasks. First, they were expected to develop ideas for new products. Second, they would run new product trials in close collaboration with line departments. It was anticipated that 4 to 6 promising ideas for new products would be ready within a year. After the new product ideas get approved by the leadership team, they would be taken up for commercial production.

The NPD teams from different business divisions met at the company headquarters to work out their strategy and their approach. In one of the business divisions, the leader of the newly constituted NPD team called a meeting to present the broad approach to the line managers. He pointed out that the present organization was not geared to develop new products. Then he outlined the role and importance of the new initiative. He added that members of the NPD team will approach them initially for obtaining data and their views. After a few months, they will request them for help with conducting trials. He paused to see if there were any questions.

An employee at the meeting turned to Employee C sitting next to him and whispered: *"What do you think this means?"* His friend C responded: *"I have no idea. What is he talking about? We are still number one in our market. How will this new team help in any way? And why do they need a series of meetings with all of us? Don't they know what they want to do?"*

At another table, Employee E slouched back in his chair in apparent disgust. The person next to him raised his eyebrows to non-verbally inquire why he seemed so distressed. *"I am sick of these knee-jerk changes"* was E's response. *"Why is this necessary? We have been coming up regularly with new products. What does he mean by saying that we're not geared to develop new products? I have personally contributed to two new products. You have done that. They will destroy the present arrangement. And this team idea is totally hare-brained."*

At the very back of the room two other colleagues looked at each other. Employee P seemed quite annoyed. *"Do they seriously expect to come up with new products with this team"*, he said. *"We know how some persons have got on the team, and whose ideas they'll keep parroting. It is joke to believe that we are going to entrust the strategic direction of the company to this group. The management clearly has some ulterior motive"*.

Most of us would say that the three employees are exhibiting resistance, and resistance is the primary reason why most changes fail. Rick Maurer[1], a change scholar would only partly agree with the above statement. It is true that 70 per cent of all major changes in

organizations fail. It is also true that failure is caused not due to lack of technical skills or resources, but due to the fact that people don't put their minds and hearts behind the change. Is this not resistance? Well, who is resisting whom? According to Maurer, it is often the leaders who plan and initiate changes in ways that create inertia, apathy and opposition.

For instance, when a change is announced, people respond in different ways. 30 % tend to support and cooperate. 50 % will be neutral and adopt a 'wait and watch' attitude. 20 % will generally be against the change. Among the 70 % who don't support the change, some get confused and question as to why this is being done. Some express immediate criticism. A few persons say 'yes', but do just the minimum. There may even be sabotage or disruption through non-cooperation and negative corridor talk. Individuals may also respond through silence. In some cases, they may deflect or duck the issue.

When they are faced with such resistance, managers typically respond by pushing the change even harder. They use their power or apply the force of reason by giving complicated arguments for change. They may choose to ignore the resistance. Unfortunately such responses only increase the opposition. The more the change leaders continue to lead in the same way and thus persist with their old approaches, the more the resistance intensifies. Of course, it may manifest in silent ways, and not necessarily as open revolt or blunt criticism. Ultimately the change fails without people's backing. To manage change effectively, it is important that we should rethink resistance.

This means that the change leader must recognize the following in the above case:

1. Employees C, E and P are not born resistors whose only mission is to ruin the organization's change initiative.

2. It is possible that they don't have the same foundation to understand the NPD initiative.

3. Perhaps C, E and P are in the early part of the change journey, while the leader of the NPD team is far ahead in the journey. Consequently, effective communication is not taking place.

4. The quality of relationship between the change leader and the employees is not sufficiently strong to make C, E and P to venture into the unknown landscape.

5. Resistance is a natural human reaction. If change leaders understand resistance and the personal and interpersonal processes that change implies, they will be able to deal with resistance effectively.

Rick Maurer points out that there are three types of resistance. We discuss these below. In his framework, the leader of the NPD team should ask himself: Can I make C understand? Can I make E like it? Can I make P trust me?

**Cognitive Resistance: "I don't get it!"**

Cognitive Resistance pertains to the world of information – for example, facts, analysis, ideas, descriptions, presentations, or logical arguments. For example, in the opening case example, Employee C did not understand how the NPD team could help. The person heard that the team members will have a series of meetings, but had no idea of the purpose of those meetings. When persons have not understood, or "have not got it", it does not mean that they lack competence or ability to understand. We live in an age where there is too much information. Despite having information, we don't always engage or connect with the process of making sense of it.

As we would see in the example given below[2], a number of reports had been sent to the prime minister on the reorganization of the dairy sector. But he had not reflected on the matter and arrived at a conclusion for himself. At the start of his personal exploration, it would appear that he had a different hypothesis in his mind. For the change to occur, however it was necessary for him to gain the new perspective.

> Mr. Lal Bahadur Shastri, the then prime minister (PM) of India had received a report from Dr. Verghese Kurien about the importance of instituting co-operative principle in the dairy sector. The PM was aware that while the milk co-operative in Anand had been growing from strength to strength, the other dairies set by the government with huge funding support had been unmitigated disasters. Despite all the reports that he had received, the PM still did not understand how Anand had achieved its success. In an unprecedented move, he decided to spend a night in one of the villages in Anand as a guest of a small farmer. This would give him an opportunity to explore the issue at the grassroots level and gain a first-hand understanding. He walked around the village, spoke to several farmers and tried to discover the secret of Anand's success.

> When the PM met Dr. Kurien the following day, he mentioned that that he had failed to learn the secret. *"I looked at the soil here; it is good but not as good as the Indo-Gangetic plain,"* said the PM. *"I looked at your climate, and there is nothing special there. The rainfall pattern is similar to what it is in large parts of India. I expected this place to be green with contented cows grazing, but this place is brown. Your buffaloes don't look as good as the buffaloes I remember in Uttar Pradesh. While farmers are all good people, your farmers don't appear as hard working as the Punjabi farmers. So I cannot find a single reason why Anand is such a great success"*.

> Dr. Kurien responded: *"The main difference is that this dairy is owned by farmers, and managed by their elected representatives. They have employed me as a professional manager to run this dairy. I am an employee of the farmers, not on deputation from the government. If I don't satisfy the farmers, I don't get merely transferred – I lose my job. When they produce more milk, I am expected to find market. I can never say that I can't collect more. When they tell me to increase productivity, I have to think of ideas such as cattle feed or inputs to farmers. So this dairy is sensitive to the needs of the*

*farmers. In the other dairies in India, this is not the case. In the absence of responsiveness and support in obtaining the inputs, managing their processes or marketing their outputs, farmers are unable to improve their production and productivity. Anand shows that what is true of New Zealand or Holland is true of India also*". Once the PM was convinced that the co-operative principle was at the heart of Anand's success, he got Dr. Kurien to set up the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB). The formation of NDDB was a significant factor in creating the white revolution in the country.

Thus giving people information or helping them discover the actual reasons is the most common way of providing cognitive clarity. We present a summary of the causes of cognitive resistance and how this resistance can be dealt with in Box 1 and Box 2 respectively.

## Box 1 – Cognitive Resistance: Possible Causes

- *Problems with Information*:

  - Perceived as not relevant for the issue under consideration

  - Different sources indicate seemingly contradictory trends

  - Viewed as coming from non-credible sources, and critical information missing

  - Given too early – without an overarching pattern, does not make sense

  - Overload – more data than what individuals can handle

- *Disagreement with regard to interpretation of data*:

  - Confusion about the actual purpose of the proposed change effort

## Box 2 – Dealing with Cognitive Resistance

This requires gaining mindshare and then creating a coherent picture in the minds of people receiving information

- *Rationale for the change*: Before stating "what" changes are needed, explain "why" they are required. Is there a compelling case for change? Does your team feel an urgency to change? Don't make it too complex.

- *Orienting the Audience*: Attention is a scarce resource. We are constantly bombarded with information, and to maintain our sanity, we deliberately ignore some information. Highlight why your audience should pay special attention to the change-related information. Help them appreciate why they need to pay attention

- *Language*: Present ideas in a manner that is understandable to the participants. This requires attention to the contexts in which the participants function and their experiences.

- *Multiple ways to make your case*: These may include data, best practices, opportunities for interaction/ conversation – the greater the variety, greater the comprehension. Different media and different styles appeal to different people.

- *Patience*: Give people time to digest the information. We tend to demand a response from others, before they have had time to make coherent sense of what has been presented.

- *Free Exchange*: Let there be conversations among people to think through their concerns.

- *Repetition*: Reinforce the message at periodic intervals. If you have already said it, make somebody else say it.

- *Psychological Safety*: Sometimes fear prevents people from asking questions – 'Are we the only ones who have not understood the message?' 'Are our questions stupid?' Create safe forums for people to legitimately explore their doubts.

### Emotional Resistance: "I don't like it!"

Occasionally, well-meaning leaders give more information, hold more meetings and make more presentations. But sometimes they find that these efforts don't work – often because the issue has become one of emotion, not cognition. Often emotional resistance arises from fear – loss of face, status, control or even their jobs and future well-being.

When emotional resistance kicks in, people can get into fight, flight or freeze mode. They may get into angry outbursts or arguments (fight); they may stop listening (flight); or they may feel like their very survival is at stake (freeze). Emotions can produce intense reactions. Since organizations don't encourage people to respond emotionally, they get expressed as "rational" concerns. The change leader requires empathy to read between the lines and pick up the anxieties or fears. As we can see in the following example[3], it is completely inappropriate to use logical arguments to deal with emotional resistance.

> A decision had been made to merge two software firms of equivalent size. The senior and middle level personnel of both firms had come together to sort out merger-related concerns and issues. The meeting was organized in a large hall. At one point during the discussion, someone expressed a concern: "*As a multinational, we have had a certain culture in our firm. But you are an Indian firm largely owned by a single family. What would be our new culture after merger? Are we expected to forget about our old multinational culture?*" It was clear that the person did not like the idea of giving up elements of the earlier culture.

> A top manager of the 'Indian firm' (as it was referred to by the person raising the issue) got up immediately, walked up to the podium and said, "*How can you say that our firm is not a multinational? We operate in more than a dozen countries and have offices in all those locations; at any given point of time, a third of our employees work abroad; and we earn 100 per cent of our revenues from overseas work. So we are as much a multinational as you are*". He went on with more facts and figures to bolster his argument. It seemed as if he wanted to use his finely honed debating skills to bury the cultural issue once and for all in that meeting.

> But the top manager's rational argument only pushed the issue underground. Many people simply withdrew from the discussion. The change leader lost a great opportunity to explore what the actual concerns were. Perhaps people were anxious about possible loss of autonomy in the merged entity. People may have wondered and worried whether key personnel decisions would be made on personal likes and dislikes. The merging entities should have had a dialogue on the cultural integration issues that people considered important. As they did not do this, several individuals concluded that the merger would be bad for them. The organization lost a large number of highly skilled people to competing firms. And several months after the merger, the firm has still not achieved the strategic advantages that the merger was anticipated to provide.

In Box 3 and Box 4, we outline the common causes of emotional resistance and what we can do to turn resistance into support.

**Box 3 – Emotional Resistance: Possible Causes**

- Participants find it difficult to cope with scope and complexity of change – feeling of too much change and too many demands

- Directly or indirectly, change threatens something that is valuable – e.g. loss of power, control or status

- Idea behind the change seen as worthless or not credible

- Fear of isolation or abandonment as a result of the change – feeling of losing face or respect

- Bad experience in the past with similar changes

**Box 4 – Dealing with Emotional Resistance**

Acknowledge the concerns and actively draw out people's engagement

- *Speak about the emotional aspects*: Since organizations don't encourage people to respond emotionally, issues may be couched in rational terms. While it is not easy to talk of issues that are frustrating, stressful or tough, it is not advisable to brush those under the carpet. Have conversations on how the change is perceived from different perspectives.

- *Be honest*: Even if sharing the truth would be uncomfortable, it is advisable to be straight-forward. Doing so can stop rumours. In the long run, it will also improve leadership credibility

- *Recognize the loss*: Some people may experience defeat or grief. Even if it is hard, you should acknowledge those feelings.

- *Time and Space*: Don't expect people to get quickly reoriented. Allow time and space for reactions.

- *Appreciate the stakes*: Certain issues are most important for certain participants. Wherever possible, find creative ways of protecting those stakes. This will minimize the feeling of loss. If it is possible, you may redesign change to make participants more secure or implement it to accommodate inputs and ideas from participants.

- *What's in it for them*: Ultimately, there must be value proposition. Change must benefit in some way. To minimize fear and maximize excitement about positive aspects, emphasize what's in it for people with whom you're conversing. Certain things may become easier; there may be improvement; new opportunities will appear; or the uncertainty may reduce.

- *Involvement in the change process*: People support what they have a hand in building.

**Personally Oriented Resistance: "I don't like you"**

Personally Oriented Resistance reflects absence of trust and confidence in the change leader. It is possible that people are okay with the change; but they are not okay with the change leader. That makes this resistance a hard pill to swallow. Without trust, there is no way that change can be managed successfully.

Lack of trust does not necessarily mean that people dislike the change leader. It may be the past dealings that make them suspicious. It is possible that the change leader is from the head office, and people are sceptical of anything that the head office initiates. It is important to remember that perception is reality. If people perceive that the change leader is not trust-worthy, then they will behave as per their perception or belief until they are proven otherwise. As we see in the case illustration[4] below, the experience with and the image of the leader can be moved in a positive direction and this reduces personally oriented resistance.

> A new unit leader had assumed charge about six months earlier. He organized a meeting with departmental and sectional heads to plan for the following year. Though the plan was more or less ready, there was little or no excitement about it. The leader felt that the members had reservations, but they were not expressing them. He was also aware that the earlier unit leaders had followed directive leadership styles. Though annual planning exercises were carried out as rituals, inputs and ideas from members were not considered. Decision making was concentrated at the level of the unit leader.
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> Realizing the futility of trying to win people over through logical arguments, the leader tried a "reverse brain storming" session. He asked the departmental and sectional heads to get into smaller sub-groups and brainstorm on the *reasons why the plan would fail*. Though the group initially thought that it was a strange assignment, they gradually warmed up to the task. In an hour's time, the different sub-groups came up with 46 reasons why the plan would not work. At that stage, the leader asked the group to review the list, remove the overlaps and prioritize the concerns. Through this process, the group identified 5 significant factors, which posed major threats. Then a detailed plan was worked out to ensure that those factors were taken care of. As a result, the group not only avoided a number of potential problems, but also took ownership of the plan and made it succeed.

The common causes and remedial actions for this type of resistance are presented below in Box 5 and Box 6.

## Box 5 – Personally Oriented Resistance: Possible Causes

- *Ignoring emotional resistance*: When emotional resistance has not been handled over time, it snowballs into personally oriented resistance.

- *Lack of trust in the change manager*: The mistrust may arise from the person's role, personality, project, or task. Sometimes, factors like cultural background, gender or power differences can also lead to the trust gap.

- *History of relationship*: People doubt the credibility of the change or the change leader. This may also arise from the past dealings

- *Value Conflicts*: Disagreements on values can also be the source of the problem

- *Displaced resistance*: The actual resistance may be towards another person or aspect, but the change leader may be perceived as a symbol of the change and thus become a 'target' for the resistance

## Box 6 – Dealing with Personally Oriented Resistance

- Rebuild damaged relationships and attend to neglected relationships
  - ➢ Explore how you can increase respect from the stakeholders
  - ➢ Reflect on what could increase your credibility with the stakeholders
- Reduce tension in relationships
  - ➢ Undo bad decisions
  - ➢ Acknowledge if mistakes or bad decisions have been made
  - ➢ Settle misunderstandings – be open to renegotiate residual concerns/ issues
  - ➢ Provide safe outlets for pent-up anger
  - ➢ Acknowledge that people may have been hurt in the past –talk without defensiveness
- Establish trust in relationship
  - ➢ Pick up early signals of people displaying lack of trust/ confidence; act to set things right
  - ➢ Seek the help of partners in the change process to build trust
  - ➢ Get feedback on how you react to change – stop dysfunctional behaviors
- Create opportunities for people to know you and vice versa
  - ➢ Provide forums for free and frank conversations characterized by mutual honesty
  - ➢ Keep up the communication – give people time to reflect
  - ➢ Share and discuss data as openly as possible
- Be open to inputs and ideas from others

## Concluding Observations

As Rick Maurer points out, support and resistance are two sides of a coin. In terms of cognitive level, people either understand you or they don't. At the emotional level, they are either excited about the change or they are anxious. At the personally oriented level, they either trust you or they don't. Change leaders should remember that the different factors are either working for or against them. What are the broad guidelines for converting resistance into support and effectively managing change?

- The three types of resistance represent three different worlds of reason, emotion and trust. When you encounter resistance, diagnose the underlying concerns carefully.

- Think of resistance as a cause and effect phenomenon. When you find resistance, ask: "What are the causes of this opposition?"

- Change is extremely difficult when stakeholders are in the dark. Help them recognize challenge or opportunity.

- Address resistance in the right way. To deal with emotional or trust issue, you cannot provide information or make a logical argument. In emotional or trust issue, the more you push with reason, the more people will get embedded in resistance.

- Perception is reality. People may read risks wrong, but in their minds the danger is real.

- In a change journey, don't run too far ahead of others. Stay engaged.

- Resistance can pop up anytime during the change journey. Stay in touch with the pulse of the organization. Build in feedback loops to pick up early signals of waning interest or disenchantment. Ask why this may be happening, and initiate corrective steps.

Carl von Clausewitz, the author of a seminal work on the conduct of war states: "*In war, everything is simple, but it is simple things that are difficult.*" Change projects fail because managers have not taken into account all the irksome little conditions or frictions that have to be dealt with for the plan to succeed. Successful organizational change requires that the leaders anticipate such resistance and deal with them quickly and effectively.

[1] Maurer, Rick *Introduction to Change without Migraines*, Maurer and Associates, 2009

[2] Kurien, V. "*Public Ownership and Social Development: The Anand Experience*" in 'Managerial Dilemmas: Cases in Organizational Behaviour', S. Ramnarayan and Ram Mohan Rao (Eds), New Delhi: Tata-McGraw-Hill Publishing, 1996, p. 383

[3] Nilakant V. and S. Ramnarayan, *Change Management: Altering Mindsets in a Global Context*, Response Books, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2006, p. 145

[4] Ramnarayan, S. Designing Participative processes for Change: Insights from OD Field, in *NHRD Network Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 3, July 2008, p. 63