Management Decision

Resistance: a constructive tool for change management

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Traditionally, resistance has been cast as adversarial – the enemy of change that must be defeated if change is to be successful. While it is apparent that classical management theory viewed resistance in such a manner, recent literature contains much evidence that suggests resistance may indeed be useful and is not to be simply discounted. Present day suggestions and prescriptions for managing resistance have evidently disregarded this research and left little room for utility in resistance. This paper argues that the difficulty of organisational change is often exacerbated by the mismanagement of resistance derived from a simple set of assumptions that misunderstand resistance's essential nature. It is suggested that management may greatly benefit from techniques that carefully manage resistance to change by looking for ways of utilising it rather than overcoming it.

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Introduction

Resistance to change has long been recognised as a critically important factor that can influence the success or otherwise of an organisational change effort. Research undertaken by Maurer (1996) indicated that one-half to two-thirds of all major corporate change efforts fail and resistance is the "little-recognised but critically important contributor" to that failure (p. 56). Research undertaken in the UK by Oakland and Sohal (1987) also found that resistance was one of the major impediments to the use of production management techniques by British production managers. Similarly, Eisen *et al.* (1992) and Terziovski *et al.* (1997) found resistance by management and workers to be the major impediment to the use of quality management practices in Australian manufacturing industry.

Not that resistance is solely to blame for these statistics, Kotter *et al.* (1986) comment that there is a tendency amongst managers to approach change with a simple set of beliefs that end up exacerbating the problems that arise because they fail to understand them in any systematic manner. One such "simple belief" is that a change process that occurs with only minimal resistance must have been a good change that was managed well. This assumption is somewhat naïve and belies a common perspective that casts resistance in a negative light. Resistance is often viewed by managers as the enemy of change, the foe which must be overcome if a change effort is to be successful (Schein, 1988, p. 243).

However, careful examination of the literature surrounding resistance indicates that this adversarial approach has little theoretical support. Rather, a great deal of work undertaken during the 1960s and 1970s found that there is in fact utility to be gained from resistance, therefore it should not be avoided or quashed as suggested by classical management theory.

The review presented in this paper finds that this notion of utility in resistance has been largely disregarded by present day prescriptions for the management of change, and perhaps this is contributing to the lack of success organisations have in securing successful change.

Definitions of resistance

Schein (1988) believes resistance to change to be one of the most ubiquitous of organisational phenomena. A number of authors have defined resistance. For example, Ansoff (1988, p. 207) defines resistance as a multifaceted phenomenon, which introduces unanticipated delays, costs and instabilities into the process of a strategic change, whilst Zaltman and Duncan (1977, p. 63) define resistance as any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo.

Thus, resistance, in an organisational setting, is an expression of reservation which normally arises as a response or reaction to change (Block 1989, p. 199). This expression is normally witnessed by management as any employee actions perceived as attempting to stop, delay, or alter change (Bemmels and Reshef, 1991, p. 231). Thus resistance is most commonly linked with negative employee attitudes or with counter-productive behaviours.

Understanding resistance over time

> The writers of classical organisation theory viewed conflict as undesirable, detrimental to the organisation. Ideally it should not exist. Their prescription was simple. Eliminate it (Rowe and Boise, 1973, p. 151).

Resistance has been classically understood as a foundation cause of conflict that is undesirable and detrimental to organisational health. During the 1940s theorists considered unity of purpose to be the hallmark of a technically efficient and superior organisation, whilst considering pluralism and divergent attitudes as greatly reducing the organisation's effectiveness and impeding its performance. Resistance was therefore understood as the emergence of divergent opinions that detract from the proficiency of the organisation and the resistant worker was painted as a subversive whose individual self-interest

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clashed with the general interest and well-being of the organisation. Resistance quickly became understood as the enemy of change, the foe which causes a change effort to be drawn out by factional dissent and in-fighting. The prescription of this viewpoint was to eliminate resistance, quash it early and sweep it aside in order to make way for the coming change (see Rowe and Boise, 1973, p. 151; cf. Mooney, 1939; Urwick, 1947).

Early human resource theory also cast resistance in a negative light by perceiving it as a form of conflict that was indicative of a breakdown in the normal and healthy interactions that can exist between individuals and groups. Once again, the prescription was to avoid resistance in order to restore harmony to the organisation (Milton *et al.*, 1984, p. 480).

In the years that followed, the conception of resistance to change benefited greatly from the application of psychological, sociological and anthropological disciplines to study of management. As the understanding of resistance became increasingly sophisticated, it became clear that resistance is a far more complex phenomenon than once thought. Rather than being simply driven by the parochial self-interest of individual employees, this research concluded that resistance was a function of a variety of social factors, including:

- *Rational factors*: resistance can occur where the employees' own rational assessment of the outcomes of the proposed change differ with the outcomes envisaged by management. Such differences of opinion cast doubt in the employees' mind as to the merit or worth of the changes, and thus they may choose to stand in opposition or voice concern (Ansoff, 1988, p. 211; Grusky and Miller, 1970, p. 63; Kotter *et al.*, 1986, p. 352).
- *Non-rational factors:* the reaction of an individual worker to a proposed change is also a function of predispositions and preferences which are not necessarily based on an economic-rational assessment of the change. These may include instances of resistance workers who simply do not wish to move offices, prefer working near a particular friend, or are uncertain of the outcomes of implementing new technology (Judson, 1966, p. 19; Kaufman, 1971, p. 15; McNurry, 1973, p. 381; Sayles and Straus, 1960, p. 305).
- *Political factors:* resistance is also influenced by political factors such as favouritism or "point scoring" against those initiating the change effort (Blau, 1970, p. 135 (cited in Grusky and Miller, 1970); Ansoff, 1988, p. 212).
- *Management factors:* inappropriate or poor management styles also contribute to resistance (Judson, 1966, p. 32; Lawrence, 1954, p. 53).

As organisational theory developed over time, it drew attention to the fact that resistance to change is also built into organisational factors. Systems, processes, sunk costs and so on, all contribute to a kind of inertia that influences an organisation toward greater reliability and predictability which, in turn, acts against change (Kaufmann, 1971, p. 23; Tichy, 1983, p. 344; White and Bednar, 1991, p. 509; Zaltman and Duncan, 1977, p. 76).

As a result of this research, resistance to change became recognised for what it truly is: a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that is caused by a variety of factors. Furthermore, a consensus of opinion began to form that, contrary to classical theory, resistance (and the conflict that it can cause) may not be an enemy of change. Rather, there is a strong case that suggests that resistance should not be approached adversarially because it can play a useful role in an organisational change effort.

The utility of resistance

> Industrial progress finds one of its greatest handicaps in the frequent resistance of both management and workers to change of any sort (McNurry, 1973, p. 380).

Hultman (1979, p. 54) writes that "Unfortunately, when the word resistance is mentioned, we tend to ascribe negative connotations to it. This is a misconception. There are many times when resistance is the most effective response available." Leigh (1988, p. 73) also writes that "resistance is a perfectly legitimate response of a worker" and Zaltman and Duncan (1977, p. 62) cite Rubin saying that resistance should be used constructively.

That resistance can play a useful role in an organisational change effort certainly stands juxtaposed to a traditional mindset that would view it as an obstacle that is normally encountered on the way to a successful change process. Nevertheless, it is a conclusion reached by a variety of authors who suggest that there are a number of advantages of resistance. When managed carefully, these advantages can in fact be utilised by the organisation to greatly assist change.

First of all, resistance points out that it is a fallacy to consider change itself to be inherently good. Change can only be evaluated by its consequences, and these cannot be known with any certainty until the change effort has

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been completed and sufficient time has passed (Hultman, 1979, p. 53).

To this end, resistance plays a crucial role in influencing the organisation toward greater stability. While pressure from external and internal environments continue to encourage change, resistance is a factor that can balance these demands against the need for constancy and stability. Human systems remaining in a steady state encourage processes and specialisations to stabilise, consolidate, and improve which allows the organisation a level of predictability and control. Thus, the system is able to gain a certain momentum or rhythm that is also critical for organisational survival (Albanese, 1973, pp. 413-17; Hultman, 1979, p. 53). While these maintenance needs are widely recognised, the emphasis in the literature certainly remains on the requirements of change and dynamism. The challenge therefore is to find the right balance between change and stability; avoiding the dysfunctionality of too much change while ensuring stability does not become stagnation.

As our understanding of resistance has become increasingly clear, it has also become apparent that people do not resist change *per se*, rather they resist the uncertainties and potential outcomes that change can cause.

> Resistance to a change is not the fundamental problem to be solved. Rather, any resistance is usually a symptom of more basic problems underlying the particular situation. Resistance can [therefore] serve as a warning signal directing the timing of technological changes (Judson, 1966, p. 69).

As such, resistance plays a crucial role in drawing attention to aspects of change that may be inappropriate, not well thought through, or perhaps plain wrong. Either way, it is the organisation's method of communication, therefore attempting to eliminate resistance as soon as it arises is akin to shooting the messenger who delivers bad news.

> Specifically,[management] can use the nature of the resistance as an indicator of the cause of resistance. It will be most helpful as a symptom if [management] diagnoses the causes for it when it occurs rather than inhibiting it at once (Bartlett and Kayser, 1972, p. 407).

A further advantage that resistance contributes to the change process is an influx of energy. Psychologists have long understood the danger of apathy or acquiescence when there is a need for growth and development. We are all familiar with the classic adage "you can not help the person who will not first help themselves", rather the individual requires a certain dissatisfaction with their current or future states in order to gain sufficient motivation to do something about it. In the same way, there is a certain level of motivation or energy required to implement change in an organisation.

Where a workplace is marked by apathy or passivity, implementing change is a very difficult task (Litterer, 1973, p. 152). With resistance and conflict comes the energy or motivation to seriously address the problem at hand. Where energy is lacking, change is often uncreative, sparsely implemented, and inadequately utilised. Where resistance is at play, there is a need to examine more closely the problems that exist and consider more deeply the changes proposed. Once again, though, a balance must be maintained. Where conflict becomes too great, it may assume the focus of the energy causing the issues created to recede into the background. Consequently, authors speak of an "optimal level of motivation" (Thomas and Bennis, 1972, p. 383) that will serve the change process and possibly improve its outcome.

In addition to injecting energy into a change process, resistance also encourages the search for alternative methods and outcomes in order to synthesise the conflicting opinions that may exist. Thus resistance becomes a critical source of innovation in a change process as more possibilities are considered and evaluated.

> Often a particular solution is known to be favoured by management and consequently does not benefit from a thorough discussion. Under such circumstances, acceptance is built in, and the organisation's growth and change is limited to the diagnostic and prescriptive capabilities of those who proposed the change (Albanese, 1973, p. 418).

This aspect of resistance cannot be understated in its importance. Herbert Simon's (1976) work into the rational decision, for example, drew attention to the fact that many management decisions are non-rational because they simply do not generate a sufficient number of alternative solutions to a problem, nor are these alternatives adequately evaluated. Further more, Janis's (1982) notion of group-think highlights the danger of conformity in group decision making and the importance of vigorous debate, thus resistance similarly plays a crucial role. As Maurer points out:

> Resistance is what keeps us from attaching ourselves to every boneheaded idea that comes along (Maurer, 1996).

In combination, these aspects of resistance make a persuasive case for re-evaluating the classical understanding of resistance. Equally, they call into question the assumption that a change effort that is met with little resistance should be automatically deemed a

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"good" change. The legislative process, for example, is predicated upon resistance playing a crucial role in ensuring the best possible laws are produced. Resistance, in the form of rivalry between (at least) two parties, injects energy into the process and sparks debate where opinions differ. Resistance encourages greater scrutiny of legislation. It prompts the search for a variety of alternatives and evaluates these with greater rigour. It also means that the implementation process will be considered carefully, thereby improving the adoption of these changes by the general public.

Imagine then, a situation where new legislation that considerably alters an established law is enacted by parliament via a process that is marked by little resistance. It would certainly raise concerns that the new law has not been adequately scrutinised, nor had the benefit of vigorous debate. If the process of implementation is not well thought out, it may only be sparsely adopted by the general public, rendering the law ineffective.

The management of resistance

The suggestions and prescriptions of correct resistance management contain a curious dualism; while they appear to embrace much of the understanding of resistance gained from the 1960s and 1970s they simultaneously ignore the suggestion that, in certain instances, there is utility to be gained.

The overwhelming suggestion in the management literature is that participative techniques are the best method of handling resistance. Employee participation in management as a means of resolving resistance has been investigated since the mid 1940s. The now classic studies by Lewin (1991) and Coch and French (1948) both concluded that involvement in the learning, planning and implementation stages of a change process significantly influences commitment to change and apparently lowers resistance. This theme has been taken up widely in management literature and forms the backbone of significant management schools of thought, such as organisation development theory and human resource management (Milton *et al.*, 1984, pp. 481-2).

Essentially, the argument behind participative management techniques is that, through a carefully managed process of two way communication, information sharing and consultation, employees tend to become more committed to the change effort, rather than simply remaining compliant with it (Kotter *et al.*, 1986, p. 355; Makin *et al.*, 1989, p. 165; White and Bednar, 1991, p. 510). Without entering the debate with regard to the pros and cons of participative management styles, it is apparent that such techniques are strongly advocated where resistance is expected to be high; the goal being to simply reduce the level of resistance actually encountered. The latent assumption apparently is that the less resistance encountered by a change effort, the better. Very rarely is it suggested that resistance should be utilised.

It appears, then, that the learning of the 1960s and the 1970s has been forgotten. There is a notable absence of change management models and theories that actually incorporate the possibility of utility in resistance. While it is commonly suggested that managers prepare for the change process by estimating the degree of resistance they expect to encounter, rarely is it suggested that the nature of this resistance be diagnosed to see if there is any benefit to be gained from its utilisation.

The fact that management theory has apparently not embraced the notion of utility in resistance suggests that an adversarial approach to resistance, reminiscent of that found in classical management theory, is still the prevalent mindset of managers. Resistance continues to be viewed as the enemy of change that must be "overcome" and participative techniques are the techniques advocated to achieve this end.

Research conducted by Maurer (1996) supports this point. He found that the predominant way implementors of change responded to employees' reactions was to resist their resistance – that is, meet force with force. Most often this occurred through the force of reason. Information "sharing" often amounted to little more than information "battering" where the recipients of change are confronted with a barrage of slide shows, data analysis and hefty reports. Though these techniques may be categorised as participative in form, they are far from participative in nature. They amount to little more than an exercise in salesmanship and clearly illustrate an adversarial management mindset.

Conclusion – rethinking resistance

The intention of this review is not to provide neat answers to the complicated problems associated with resistance. Rather, it is to point out that, although the theoretical understanding of resistance is well advanced, it is apparent that this knowledge has not impacted common perceptions of management and therefore has not transferred into the development of solid resistance management techniques.

The review has found that resistance remains to this day a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that continues to affect the outcomes of change, both negatively and positively. Although research has procured a solid understanding of resistance and the benefits that can accrue to an organisation through its proper utilisation, it appears that the classical adversarial approach remains the dominant means of managing resistance because such learning is not reflected in modern management techniques.

It would be drawing a long bow to say that the answer to the problem of resistance management is to simply begin to employ techniques that hold the possibility of utility in resistance. This is not the conclusion of this review. Rather it is to point out that modern management has only applied certain aspects of earlier research (for example using participative techniques) while apparently ignoring others. The suggestion is that resistance management may improve significantly if the adversarial approach is replaced with one that retains the possibility of benefiting through the utilisation of resistance.

As has already been mentioned before, people do not resist change *per se*, rather they resist the uncertainties and the potential outcomes that change can cause. Managers must keep this in mind at all times. Resistance can play a crucial role in drawing everyone's attention to aspects of change that may be inappropriate, not well thought through or perhaps plain wrong. In this case managers should be encouraged to search for alternative methods of introducing the change. They must communicate and consult regularly with their employees. This is perhaps one of the most critical success factors in implementing change in an organisation. Employees must be given the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of the change project and they must be given the opportunity to provide feedback. Teamwork involving management and employees can overcome many of the difficulties experienced by organisations in the past. Managers should facilitate teamwork, they should empower their workers to be involved and they should provide the right environment and the necessary resources for employees to take part.

In terms of further research in this area, there are considerable opportunities. Researchers can develop appropriate techniques for measuring resistance in different situations. More importantly, research documenting how these techniques have been applied and how managers have gained utility from resistance would be of considerable benefit to managers. In-depth case studies in this respect would be invaluable.

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Application questions

1 Discuss some examples where resistance to change has proved useful.

2 Is "change management" an area worthy of study in its own right?

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