

10 Strategies You Can Use to Overcome Resistance to Change

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Change is such a constant in today's organizations that to mention it is like telling an old and not-very-welcome joke at a dinner party. Nevertheless, sometimes in a change effort, the organization makes you the story-teller. How then can you bring out that old saw in fresh and effective ways? How can you help your workplace accept an impending and unavoidable change? Here are some proven strategies that can make you more successful at overcoming resistance to change.

1. Address Personal Concerns First

Most organizations justify the need for change by telling their employees—the ultimate users of the change—all of the wonderful things the change will mean for the organization. This is a poor approach to getting audience buy-in. When faced with a change, people react first with their own concerns: “What’s in it for me?” “Does this mean I’ll have a different schedule?” “Will this break up our department?” So, first things first. As a change agent, you should deal with the users’ personal concerns first and focus later (if at all) on the organizational benefits.

2. Link the Change to Other Issues People Care About

The perceived need for a change can be increased by linking it to other issues that people already care about (CRED, 2009). By showing how a change is connected to issues of health, job security, and other things that are already in the front of people’s minds, you can make a change “more sticky” and less likely to be replaced as new demands for their attention show up.

3. Tap into People’s Desire to Avoid Loss

People are more sensitive to loss than to gain. This “negativity bias” is a longstanding survival trait that has kept humans alive throughout their development as a species. Historically, it was always more important to avoid stepping on a snake than to find a soft place to sleep. Humans may have advanced in many ways, but something scary still gets and holds attention more quickly and longer than something pleasant. Therefore, rather than just telling people what they stand to gain from a change, you may have a greater impact by telling them what they stand to lose if they don’t accept the change.

4. Tailor Information to People’s Expectations

People generally hold firm views of how the world works. These often unconscious and invisible “mental models” govern much of people’s thinking including how they perceive a potential change (Carey, S., 1986; Morgan, M., Fischhoff, B., Bostrom, A., et al., 2002). For example, they may tend to see a change as something good about to happen (a *promotion* model) and willingly accept it, or they may see a change as something bad about to happen (a *prevention* model) and deal with it as an “ought to do” while focusing their energy on avoiding loss (Cesario, Grant, and Higgins, 2004; Higgins, 1997, 2000). You can provide all the logical arguments in the world in support of your

change, but if your arguments don't match the basic assumptions and rules to the way the person sees the world, you are unlikely to get very far. To make matters worse, people hold fast to their current beliefs, desires, or feelings; this "confirmation bias" means that if the change you are promoting doesn't appeal to their current beliefs, desires, or feelings, you may have a hard time making any headway.

5. Group Your Audience Homogeneously

Getting the message over to a group of people who share basic opinions with regard to the change is easier than getting it over to a group of people with diverse opinions. Whenever possible, divide your audience into homogeneous groups insofar as their view of the change goes. For instance, if you want to convince people to do certain things differently because of climate change, you might want to know who watches Fox News and who watches MSNBC. Not because one is better than the other, but because the argument you present will be tailored differently for the two groups. This isn't manipulation (unless you are operating in the shadows without their knowledge and consent); it's merely being smart about how you present your argument and evidence for change.

6. Take Advantage of People's Bias—Buy Now, Pay Later!

People tend to see things that are happening now as more urgent than those that will happen in the future (Weber, 2006). This tendency is often referred to as "discounting the future." For instance, when presented with the option of getting \$250 now or \$366 in a year (a 46% rate of interest), the average person will choose the \$250 now (Hardesty and Weber, 2009). This suggests that when trying to persuade others that a change is necessary, even though the future threat and loss may be great, it is desirable to emphasize that *inaction* now poses its own threat and loss. Also, it is often easier to get people to *agree now on a solution*, if they can *postpone implementation* until some time in the future. People tend to believe that they will be in a better position to change in the future; they expect to have more time, more money, and fewer demands than they do now. While experience does not support this belief, it is one that provides people with the motivation to act in the present toward a future goal. Consequently, it is often easier to get people to agree now on a change that won't take place until some point in the future. You will no doubt recognize this as a strategy commonly used by merchandisers—Buy now, pay later!

7. Make the Change Local and Concrete

Often organizational changes are responses to some sort of threat. If that threat is seen as more relevant to distant outsiders than to the people in the organization, or if the threat is presented in the abstract, then the targeted people will have little motivation to change (Leiserowitz, 2007). However, if you can demonstrate in concrete terms that the threat is local and will have a real impact on the people you are trying to get to accept the change, you may find it easier to persuade them to buy-in. For instance, when people think about the threat of climate change, many think of it as a threat to other people and other places. In a situation like this, getting people to adopt inconvenient changes is difficult. On the other hand, if you can show them with concrete examples exactly how the change will impact them in their local community or organization, then they are more likely to adopt the necessary changes.

8. Appeal to the Whole Brain

Often, when making a case for a change, change agents use lots of numbers, charts, tables, etc. Such facts and figures appeal especially to one side of the brain. But the human brain has two sides, and although they work together, each has a different way of processing information. The left side is analytical and controls the processing of quantitative information. The right side is experiential and controls the processing of emotional information. Even for audiences where one side may dominate (e.g., engineers who favor facts and figures), the most effective communication targets both sides of the brain (Chaiken and Trope, 1999; Epstein, 1994; Marx, et. al. 2007; Sloman, 1996). One compelling example of this is the design of Apple's iPhone and other products. People do not stand in line to buy these products simply because of their valuable functionality (which appeals to the left analytical brain), but also because the objects themselves are designed to appeal to the emotions as well (the right brain). To appeal to both sides of the brain, you might

- Combine analytic information with vivid imagery in the form of film footage, metaphors, personal accounts, real-world analogies, and concrete comparisons
- Employ messages designed to emphasize relevant personal experience and elicit an emotional response

9. Beware of Overloading People

While connecting with people's emotional side, it is important not to overload with too much. People can attend to only a limited number of things. Scholars sometimes refer to this as the "Finite Pool of Worry" (Linville and Fischer, 1991). Change expert Daryl Connor (1993) likens this to pouring water onto a sponge. At first, the sponge can absorb the water. However, at some point, the sponge becomes full and any additional water simply runs off. The *finite pool of worry* is full.

This has implications for change agents. Often people's lives are already filled with change. When you ask (or demand) that they worry about many more things, you may inadvertently introduce "emotional numbing," a state in which people fail to respond to anything except threats that are immediate. So, beware of overusing emotional appeals, particularly those relying on fear!

10. Know the Pros and Cons of Your Change

Not all changes are equal. Some are more beneficial, and some cause more inconvenience and pain. It pays dividends for change agents to know how their change stacks up against six change characteristics (adapted from Rogers, 2003 and Dormant, 2011).

- **Simple**—Is your change complex or is it relatively simple to understand and do?
- **Compatible**—Is your change compatible with what your users are used to?
- **Better**—Does your change offer clear advantages over other alternatives, including the status quo?
- **Adaptable**—Can people adapt your change to their own circumstances or must they do it exactly the way you prescribe?

- **Painful**—Does your change alter social relationships in any way by changing where people work, who they deal with, or how they spend their time?
- **Divisible**—Can you break the change you offer into smaller parts or phases, or must audiences implement it all at one time?

It is worth noting a couple of important points when judging your change against these characteristics. The first is that any change can have both positive and negative aspects in the same characteristic. For instance, a change might be relatively advantageous in one way and be relatively disadvantageous in another. Secondly, as you evaluate these characteristics, do so—not from your perspective—but from your target audience’s perspective. You need to understand the change from the point of view of those who will feel it most acutely.

Summary

Change is hard. That’s a cliché, but it’s also true. And because we all have to do it and also get others to do it so often, it’s also boring. But just because change has become so common as to sometimes numb us to the bone, that doesn’t mean that we can’t apply a few simple (and admittedly, a few not-so-simple) strategies to become more effective and give us a head start against resistance.

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