Reasons for Resistance to Change

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This paper will begin with a general discussion of four resistance to change categories. This will be followed by an analysis of the relevant literature and will conclude with the suggestion of a new resistance to change model along with recommendations for future research.

Introduction

Change is a way of life for those responsible for managing organizations and with change comes the discussion of resistance to change. Although the meaning of the phrase “resistance to change” is argued in the literature, the spectrum appears to range from genuine resistance to management’s mislabeling of employee behavior as resistive that is merely not in agreement with the proposed changes. Resistance to change can generally be categorized as organizational or individual. Organizational resistance encompasses patterns of organizational behavior that undermine change (Agócs, 1997) and will not be discussed here. Rather, this paper will focus on individual resistance to change.

![Figure 1. Resistance to Change](image-url)
Rational vs. Irrational Resistance

Individual resistance to change is generally a perceptual process that can be defined as either irrational or rational (de Jager, 2001). Irrational resistance is not discussed in most of the resistance to change literature because it is generally felt that there is nothing that can be done to convince those with deep seated, psychologically irrational forms of resistance to modify their behavior (de Jager, 2001). The absence of a definition of irrational resistance raises concerns that resisters who are merely exceedingly vocal may be mislabeled irrational and ignored, or even terminated, when those resisters may be capable of change. In addition, without a definition, it is difficult for a manager to look for marker behaviors and respond accordingly. Although some managers may be able to say “I know irrational resistance when I see it,” it is difficult to study such a nebulous concept.

De Jager (2001) says that rational resistance can be addressed with a compelling argument, justification, or reward sufficient to facilitate change. When resistance is rational, the resistance mechanism can be identified and the proper antidote applied. The assumption that rational resistance can always be remedied may be an overstatement. If an employee is asked to work more hours, but those hours conflict with another interest, the employee may show rational resistance, but still may not accept the proposed change no matter how compelling the argument. Although the reward may be sufficient (Recardo, 1995), the importance of the competing commitments (e.g. court ordered community service vs. volunteer softball league) may determine what reward, if any, will facilitate change.

Justified vs. Unjustified Resistance

Rational resistance to change appears to fall into one of two categories: justified or unjustified. Unjustified rational resistance is psychological and may involve hidden competing commitments (Kegan & Lahey, 2002), personal fears or insecurities (Powell & Posner, 1978; Yukl, 2006) or the belief that
change threatens ones ideals or culture (Lawson & Price, 2003; Recardo, 1995; Schein & NetLibrary, 2004; Yukl, 2006). There is a parallel between the behavioral sciences literature and unjustified resistance to change because often, psychological resistance is present outside of the organizational setting. Although different authors use slightly different approaches when cataloging psychological resistance to change, “fear” and “threat” are often the driving forces (Powell & Posner, 1978; Recardo, 1995; Yukl, 2006). These lists typically include the following:

- Fear of the unknown
- Fear of personal failure
- Fear of being seen as incompetent
- Fear of losing control
- Threat to values and ideals
- Threat of change to status

This combined list from different authors encompasses many of the unjustified reasons to resist change. Although some of the items on the list may be sometimes justified, a category that will be discussed next, during the uncertainty phase, fears or threats are seen as unjustified because the issue either does not exist or has yet to be proven to exist so resistance shouldn’t be necessary. Assuming these fears are unfounded, the individual resistance to change literature in the organizational setting only suggests that these fears and threats must be addressed. How they are addressed is left open to the reader and will vary wildly with circumstance. It could be argued that an employee with a fear of the unknown simply needs additional communication from change agents to belay that fear (Recardo, 1995). A similar solution to the fear of failure or of being seen as incompetent may be to temporarily change the way employees are evaluated so they know they won’t be penalized during the learning process or for a work flow impairment that accompanies change. Atkinson (2005), a change consultant, suggests that most change programs fail due to a lack of energy devoted to internal public relations to
help those affected by change to better understand it. Although some threats and fears may be addressed easily through better communication, those with unhealthy fears or fears that cannot be easily addressed may require longer adaptation periods, assuming their resistance is not irrational.

Kegan and Lahey (2002), organizational psychologists, propose the concept of “hidden competing commitments” (pp. 37) and look into the psychological depths of the individual for deep-seated ideals that may conflict with a willingness to change. The authors admit the timeline for change can be lengthy, but imply this psychological alteration is possible. This method appears limited to changes of significant value to the organization because the organization must first be willing to make a potentially time consuming investment in the individual to affect change. How many managers fall into this category is unknown. In addition, due to the complexity of the remedy, an organizational psychologist appears to be best equipped to search for hidden competing commitments, since your everyday executive more than likely will not have the time or knowledge necessary to uncover such elusive resistance mechanisms.

Justified resistance occurs when a real threat exists, a fear has been confirmed, or a negative or unnecessary change is presented. Resistance is considered normal when change occurs that is considered negative. Why would someone not resist a change that has a negative impact? Although non-compliance may be seen as burdensome to the change agent, professional change agents see these responses as a potential litmus test to determine if an idea may not be the best possible solution. Large-scale resistance may mean the change in its present form is a bad idea. Of the literature reviewed for this paper, only the professional consultants had the viewpoint that justified resistance may be beneficial to organizations. (de Jager, 2001; Atkinson, 2005).

Some authors postulate that justified resistance is not truly a form of resistance to change but rather a professional response to an organizational direction that is viewed as being incorrect or
incompatible with their views or knowledge. Dent and Goldberg (as cited in Oreg, 2006 p. 73) suggest that “organizational members resist negative consequences and not necessarily change itself.” in essence, divorcing normal unhappiness about negative change from the individual resistance discussion. Other authors consider rational resistance normal and agree that negative change will result in resistance (Recardo 1995; Yukl, 2006; Atkinson, 2005). Some of these negative consequences include:

- Change may mean more work
- Change may affect my job security
- Change may affect my social network
- There are insufficient resources to change
- Change is unnecessary

Although many authors agree that negative change will result in resistance that is both normal and informative to the organization, nowhere in the literature does it say that the change will not occur because of resistance. In some instances, the adage that “resistance is futile” is true. Corporate downsizing and subsequent pay reductions will result in normal resistance to change, but such resistance does not necessarily affect the outcome or the effect of the change. Under these circumstances, it seems reasonable that these behaviors not be classified as resistance, but as normal responses to negative consequences.

There appears to be a hybrid version of justified and unjustified resistance to change, I will call this version uninformed unjustified resistance. This occurs when a resistive fear exists, not because the fear is rational, but because the change agents failed to properly communicate the change to those affected. For example, there is an apparent restructuring effort and it is assumed that some will lose their jobs. A manager asks his subordinates to document their daily job duties, specifically how they perform each essential function. This request creates fear of job loss because this action is consistent with the rumor that jobs are being cut. Staff resist this request because they feel compliance brings
them closer to termination. In reality, this documentation effort is simply to help organize and improve record keeping. Company officials have already decided that no jobs will be lost and that this efficiency tactic will help save money. Resistance was unnecessary, but poor communication led to a resistance situation.

Another example of uninformed unjustified resistance is when fear that is viewed as unjustified is truly justified. This occurs when rumors are, in fact, true or change agents intentionally or unintentionally refrain from communicating importance details to those affected by a change. This appears to happen often and can be mitigated by what Recardo (1995 p. 10) so bluntly suggests as a plan to “address the needs of the losers.” Unjustified uninformed resistance should be labeled and addressed because if fear is created simply due to a lack of information, behavioral modification isn’t necessary.

Covert vs. Overt Resistance

Resistive behavior of all types is expressed in either a covert or overt way (de Jager, 2001). Atkinson (2005) suggests that overt resistance, due to its public nature, can be dealt with logically. In addition, Recardo (1995) agrees that it is easier to identify overt resistance and use the appropriate strategy to mitigate its effects. Overt resistance takes many forms but is commonly seen as an attempt to agitate others and vocal opposition. It’s unknown if overt resistance precedes covert resistance or what relationship they have to one another, but covert resistance is seemingly impossible to detect.
Covert resistance is difficult to study because, by its very nature, it is often undetectable. The literature only suggests what covert resistance may look like but does not give the change agent much insight into how to detect the undetectable. Recardo (1995) provides four examples of covert resistance to change: 1) reducing output 2) withholding information 3) unnecessarily asking for more data or studies 4) appointing unneeded task forces and committees. Atkinson (2005) suggests that many employees appear to be doing the right things, but this appearance is deceptive and in reality, they are exercising forms of covert resistance. Within the reviewed literature, only the consultants provide any insight into these practical matters because these types of observations require field experience. There appears to be little data on covert resistance although Recardo (1995 p. 8) states “…over 70 percent of the time, employees use covert means to resist change”. Recardo does not frame this statement nor is it cited, but the statement does not seem unreasonable.

There appears to be a hybrid form of resistance that I will call *discovered covert resistance*. This occurs when a covert resistance measure becomes overt. For example, a staff member attempts to resist change by covertly not answering the telephone during business hours in an attempt to harm client relationships. A client calls the manager and states his calls went unanswered. The manager addresses the issue with the employee and since now the issue is on record, any future attempts can be considered overt.

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<td>• Vocal opposition</td>
<td>• Reducing output</td>
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<td>• Agitating others</td>
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<td>• Asking for more data or studies</td>
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<td>• Appointing task forces and committees</td>
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Figure 2. Recardo (1995) Resistance Measures
Although resistance types appear circumstantial and based on the organization, position within
the organization, and oversight, it can be assumed that specific resistance measures are underreported
due to their difficulty to detect. Since job satisfaction can be related to performance, and change often
negatively impacts job satisfaction, any resistance effort will more than likely begin with some form of
lowered performance before taking any specific, covert or overt shape as discussed previously.

New Model of Change Resistance

The literature on resistance to change is quite fragmented and a more complete, perceptual
model appears to be missing. A new perceptual model (Figure 3) based on the initial question “How will
this change affect me?” (Atkinson, 2005) and one’s perception, either positive or negative, of the
proposed change will be explored here. In addition, the perceived impact of the change is included in
what I will call the Perceptual Resistance Model.

Figure 3. Perceptual Resistance Model
This model will build on the existing literature that discusses psychological resistance and include the possibility that resistance to change is often based on inadequate knowledge of the proposed change. Inadequate knowledge has many sources, but for simplicity, I will assume that either the change was ineffectively communicated or the individual affected does not understand the implications of the change.

The model begins with one’s perception of the proposed change. If the change is positive, such as a promotion, there are two possible outcomes; accept the promotion, a positive change, or resist the change. It is possible that the individual wants the proposed change, but psychological threats or fears prevent them from accepting the new position. Resistance, either overt or covert is presented. If the reasons for resisting change are shallow, additional information, coaching, or understanding will bring about change. If, after a few cycles (loop frequency) of resistance and learning, change does not occur and resistance is still present, the resistance is irrational. How many cycles must occur before the resistance is considered irrational is unknown and a topic for further study.

If the change is perceived as negative, there are two possible sub-categories: justified resistance and unjustified resistance. The definitions of justified and unjustified resistance are similar to those previously discussed. In this model, justified resistance and unjustified resistance are terms that indicate the response in proportion to consequence severity. Justified resistance occurs when consequences are perceived as severe and can take a covert of overt form. Justified resistance is often a normal response to severe negative consequences. As discussed previously, this form of resistance can be informative to the change agent since often; it’s a useful feedback loop on the quality of the change.

The other form of negative consequence resistance, unjustified resistance, involves mild negative consequences or the perception of severe negative consequences that do not exist (e.g. moving offices or believing one’s job is in jeopardy when it is not). In these circumstances,
communication is critical to bring about change. The resistance and learning cycle (loop frequency) is a process to help educate the resister about the change. If resistance is still present after so many educational cycles, the resistance can be classified as irrational because the consequences, although negative, are insignificant or the perceived consequences do not exist and attempts were made to educate the resister.

This model focuses on the resisters perception of the change consequences. Resistance type, overt or covert, plays a major role in how resisters learn new information that may alter their perceptions of the change. If the resistance is overt, management can intervene and provide additional information. If the resistance is covert, information must be readily available to the resister because management may not know resistance is present. As the social science literature discusses, perception is subject to bias, and a knowledgeable change agent can frame change in such a way that perceptions can be altered to emphasize the positive. In addition, the perception of individual consequences is more important than the change itself making public relations critical to a successful change process. One major limitation of this model is covert resistance; it’s difficult to respond to something that is not obvious. In addition, negative change has been polarized as mild or severe for the sake of example. How one resists and the resistance type displayed with moderate negative consequences is based on circumstance and the individual’s perception of consequence severity. This model has never been field tested and serves, in its current form, as a starting point for future discussion.

Conclusion

There is little consensus among authors about the characteristics of resistance to change due to its often covert nature. In addition, the psychological viewpoints that involve fears may or may not be addressable within the organizational setting. This paper provides a review and analysis of the relevant literature and introduces a new, perceptual resistance to change model. Individual resistance to change
appears to begin as a self-preservation mechanism when a real or perceived threat exists and often ends with some form of resistance.

It must be emphasized that many threats in the organizational setting are real, e.g., a potential job loss, and therefore resistance is not only expected, but could be classified as normal. It’s when the threat is only perceived, and doesn’t actually exist, and resistance is offered, that a deeper psychological answer may exist. In these instances, many organizations do not have the time or resources to change those who resist. Resistance to change is an emerging body of knowledge with many viewpoints. It is recommended that anyone who manages people should at least understand the basics of change and the associated resistance to change in an effort to bring harmony to difficult situations or eliminate those who simply refuse to change and who are sabotaging the efforts of others.

Future Research

There is a noticeable lack of empirical evidence in the resistance to change literature. Although many authors speculate about the prevalence of change resistance, there are no hard facts. Admittedly, the obvious difficulty facing resistance research are people’s unwillingness to discuss how they covertly sabotaged a change effort. It does seem possible that a survey instrument could be sent to managers in the midst of change asking them to document and describe the types of resistance encountered, severity, presentation, and resolution, as a starting point in the collection of empirical data. From there, better estimates can be made on the prevalence of covert resistance, the most detrimental form to a change effort. In addition, better definitions could be offered along with distinctions between resistance categories. As proposed in the new model, managing perception and perceived consequences is extremely important. But, how is a manager to know when the resistance presentation is so irrational, this individual should be terminated or removed from the change equation so others are
not affected by irrational resistance? More practical advice for managers should be included in future research.

Timeline and its relationship to apparent irrational resistance has also yet to be studied. The distinction between true irrational resistance, where no amount of education can reform a resister, and perceived irrational resistance, where the organization does not have sufficient time or resources to effect change is unknown. Practical experience suggests that many organizations do not have the time or resources to change those who need multiple educational cycles to change. It seems inappropriate to label resistance that could be changed, with minimal effort, irrational. Further study is required to find out where these boundaries exist and create a sufficient vocabulary to identify all of the resistance possibilities. Empirical research requires academia to work together with change agents to better poll the available knowledge base and create better distinctions so managers can effectively manage resistance to change.

References


