



Making an Ally of Resistance to Change

Change is a “constant, driving force” that is forcing business leaders to rethink and redefine the ways in which they conduct business (Weidman, 2002, p. 16). Those who believe that the pressure to change will resolve once they get over the “next change” are in for a rude awakening. Those who approach change as something to be embraced rather than to be overcome will be most successful in the 21st Century (Benedetto, 2008).

Most company leaders expect employees to manage and perform stable processes in order to produce consistently good results. However, many of these processes must be updated and revised, i.e., changed, in order for the company to maintain its competitive advantage. Employees who have become comfortable with the processes they routinely perform will naturally resist change without having a good reason for doing so. Although resistance to change many times reflects an underlying fear that the new state will not be better than the current position, resistance is a natural first response to anything that causes one to question the rationality of any action. Thus, for change to occur the change itself needs to be viewed in a different light. The purpose of the change should be viewed as creating an asset that did not previously exist (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990), i.e., change creates something entirely new, rather than destroying the memory of the old.

Creating something new means that employees and the organizations for which they work must learn and adapt to changing competitive environments (Beer et al., 1990). Unfortunately, many change initiatives fail because employees “are not prepared to succeed in a new setting” and because companies fail to adapt employees perceive change as a wasteful effort (Reinstein, 2007, p. 56). Another contributing factor is organizational leaders fail to mobilize attitudes toward the change while seeking to control the uncontrollable (Bruch & Sattelberger, 2001). In order to succeed in the face of change, leaders must neutralize and overcome impediments to change, making resistance to change *an ally* rather than the demon it is perceived to be.

Impediments to Change

The root of resistance resides in personal fears as well as the desire to survive, especially if employees sense that they must protect their social order in order to prevent painful experiences such as distress and personal chaos (Jarrett, 2003). However, impediments to change go beyond the individual; impediments exist at the interpersonal and organizational levels as well. The most critical of these impediments rest at the organizational level where leaders set the course for the change process. Several common impediments to effective change follow; however, this list is not inclusive and the argument can be made that other impediments exist.

Organizational Impediments

- a) An ineffective senior management team exists, using either a top-down dominating management style or a laissez-faire approach to company management;

- b) Leaders view change as programmatic rather than dynamic and fail to address three critical elements: coordination and teamwork, commitment, and new competencies required by the change; and
- c) Leaders fail to recognize radical change requires a “long march” rather than a few bold strokes.

Interpersonal Impediments

- a) Communication about the change effort or project goals is not evident, both horizontally across all organizational functions and vertically within each function (Cicmil, 1999);
- b) The units charged with executing plans are not engaged in the planning process; plans are invariably prepared in isolation from those with firsthand knowledge; and
- c) Change resisters perpetrate aggressive acts in the workplace, such as bullying and mobbing, which results in a hostile workplace where employees do not feel free to act.

Individual Impediments

- a) Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt-the FUD Factor-may create conflict within the individual comfort zones of several employees, causing some to question the stability of future employment with the company (Pietersen, 2002);
- b) In order to avoid potential personal pain, employees may engage personal defenses such as ego and denial which can lead to passive-aggressive behavior;
- c) Rather than being allowed to absorb new information or experiment with ideas about the new system, employees are told and directed on how to act (Lawson & Price, 2003).

Impact of Impediments on Derailing Change Efforts

According to Cicmil (1999), impediments reflect three phenomena: (a) slow learning, (b) fast forgetting, and (c) organized resistance. Slow learning and fast forgetting reflect less than full understanding of the intended change, specifically the Why behind the change (Cicmil, 1999). Organized resistance occurs when the “What” of change, i.e., the tangible and intangible outcomes of the change effort, and the “How” of change, i.e., the “optimal sequence of activities and processes” (Cicmil, 1999, p. 123), are not discussed, understood, and integrated into a new way of thinking about the processes to be executed or the outcomes to be achieved.

Of the three impediments types, organized resistance is the most likely source for derailing change efforts; furthermore, organized resistance can affect employees previously inattentive to resistance efforts. Although the conversion of some resisters is a possibility, removal may be the only viable option if the organization is going to advance. Therefore, organizational leaders must address resistance effectively for change to succeed.

Strategies for Identifying Impediments and Turning Resistance into Positive Action

People are the key differentiator between successful and failed change efforts and represent the only sustainable competitive advantage (Reinstein, 2007; Weidman, 2002). Selecting the right people who can create the future rather than protect the past is critical for organizational success (Collins, 2001; Kotter, 1996; and Reinstein, 2007). Having the right senior leaders who can help drive the change through the organization is only part of the solution; subject matter experts (SMEs) from within key functions must be engaged also as visible ambassadors throughout the organization (Reinstein, 2007).

SMEs can be valuable eyes and ears for identifying actual and potential resisters. Similarly, real change leaders (RCLs) need to be gleaned from mid-level and frontline manager ranks since these members are close to the heart of the organization's people system, i.e., the skills and behaviors of the employees who drive corporate success (Katzenbach, 1996). Since RCLs share a "determination to achieve better results through people" (Katzenbach, 1996, p. 156), these employees along with SMEs are in the best position to identify and ferret organized resistance within an organization.

Strategies for overcoming impediments are necessary for managing change; these strategies operate simultaneously at several organizational levels. According to Duck (1993), "Managing change means managing the conversation between" change leaders and those "expected to implement new strategies" (p. 100). Thus, effective change requires dialogue and communication throughout an organization; this fact is evident within some of the following strategies. Although space constraints prevent a comprehensive list of strategies, the following examples are worthy of deeper study; therefore, the reader is encouraged to seek out and review the references attached to each of the strategies.

Organizational Strategies

- a) CEOs need to appoint effective senior leadership teams that embrace "the paradox of top-down direction and upward influence" (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000);
- b) Senior leaders need to create a clear and compelling change vision, i.e., a purpose to believe in, that can be easily understood by all employees (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Kotter, 1996; Lawson & Price, 2003; Pietersen, 2002);
- c) CEOs need to establish Transition Management Teams (TMT), with a Transition Chief Operating Officer (COO) reporting directly to the CEO, that oversee, manage, and coordinate the change process throughout the organization (Duck, 1993);
- d) Leaders must demand excellence of themselves and other leaders, modeling the way and desired new behaviors, while rewarding the right behaviors and those who perform and dealing swiftly with those who do not (Jarrett, 2003; Katzenbach, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 2003).

Interpersonal or Group Strategies

- a) Leaders must be developed at all organizational levels with RCLs and SMEs engaged as change agents as well as ambassadors of change (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Collins, 2001; Katzenbach, 1996; Weidman, 2002).
- b) Fact-based, two-way, open and honest communication must be established among teams as well as with key stakeholders whose core interests underpin change efforts (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Cicmil, 1999; Reinstein, 2007; Weidman, 2002); and
- c) Implementing small things quickly generates small wins through which teams gain confidence for larger efforts and believe they are capable of bigger successes (Collins, 2001; Jarrett, 2003; Kotter, 1996; Pietersen, 2002).

Individual Strategies

- a) Leaders should require changes in behaviors, starting with their own first (Duck, 1993);
- b) Employees must recognize their personal obligation in helping their teams perform and excel since team success is in the hands of employees as much as those of leaders (Duck, 1993).
- c) Employees must become actively engaged in the learning process through which new knowledge can be created and individual value to the organization can be increased and appreciated (Duck, 1993; Reinstein, 2007).

Summary

This thought paper is intended to invoke ideas within the reader through which an introspective understanding of change within one's organization can begin to evolve. Not all strategies for dealing with impediments across all organizational levels were addressed because of time and space constraints; however, a sufficient number in each of three categories was provided from which a thoughtful self-assessment can begin. Hopefully, the reader can gain an appreciation for the breadth of available options when seeking to overcome impediments to change, including resistance by individual employees.

Benedetto (2008) noted, "These strategies do not stand alone...strategies at the organizational level may require implementation of an individual strategy first or in parallel." Therefore, organizational leaders need to be aware that many strategies exist for creating change and turning impediments into allies for successful change.

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