

CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING THE MANAGEMENT OF RESISTANCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract:

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 gain from techniques that carefully manage resistance to change by looking for ways of utilising it rather than overcoming it. Today, suggestions and prescriptions for managing resistance have left little room for utility in resistance. Traditionally, resistance has been cast as adversarial – the enemy of change that must be defeated if change is to be successful. This article suggests resistance may indeed be useful and is not to be simply discounted. The literature on change management contains numerous prerequisites for successful change, with a predominantly negative view on the issue of resistance to change. Some authors have argued for the positive utility of resistance, but have lamented a lack of management theories which support this view.

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1. Introduction

The literature on change management contains numerous prerequisites for successful change, with a predominantly negative view on the issue of resistance to change. Some authors have argued for the positive utility of resistance, but have lamented a lack of management theories which support this view.

Resistance to change has long been recognised as a critically important factor that can influence the success or otherwise of an organisational change effort. Recent researches show that half to two-thirds of all major corporate change efforts fail and resistance is the “little-recognised but critically important contributor” to that failure. Resistance was one of the major impediments to the use of production management techniques by British production managers. Resistance by management and workers was identified as the major impediment to the use of quality management practices in Australian manufacturing industry.

A survey of the literature on change management surfaces numerous prerequisites for change to be successful; the list includes *vision, mission, culture, communication, strong leadership, and participation*. But the survey reveals little about how such

prerequisites are to be achieved. One of the main arguments is that if such prerequisites are not present, then change will fail due to what is often termed "resistance to change".

Various types of resistance have been categorised. In most cases, resistance is seen to be problematic - something to be managed and overcome. Some authors have suggested strategies for "dealing with" resistance, consistent with this view of resistance as being undesirable.

The traditional attitude to resistance is that it is something undesirable, to be overcome. Some researches made in the 1960s and 1970s paints a rather different picture of resistance, and shows it has many advantages. There is utility in resistance, but current practice appears to have forgotten the lessons from this research, and resistance is still seen to be problematic. While it is recommended that managers assess "the level of resistance they expect to encounter, rarely is it suggested that the nature of resistance be diagnosed to see if there is any benefit from its utility". Also, 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.

Resistance is an expression of reservation which normally arises as a response or reaction to change. This expression is normally witnessed by management as any employee actions perceived as attempting to stop, delay, or alter change. Thus, resistance is most commonly linked with negative employee attitudes or with counter-productive behaviours.

Parallel to these developments in change management theories, another management theory has been developing over the last 20 years, called the theory of constraints (TOC) (Kendall, 1998). Management methodology called the theory of constraints (TOC) views resistance as a necessary and positive force. Reviews how TOC handles the various types of resistance identified in the change management literature, and posit that the TOC framework helps lead and manage change by providing practical guidance on, situational assessment, assumption surfacing, conflict resolution, planning and implementation of successful change.

Central to this methodology is an appreciation of resistance as a necessary and positive element in any change process. According to the theory of constraints, managers need to identify this resistance in its various forms, and use it carefully to test and hone change strategies and action plans, to enable a full, complete and successful implementation that has buy-in from everyone involved. As such, it appears that the theory of constraints may well provide a management model that incorporates the utility of resistance actively, directly and positively.

2. Understanding organizational resistance

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 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. 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.

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. 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.

- **Political factors:** resistance is also influenced by political factors such as favouritism or "point scoring" against those initiating the change effort.

- **Management factors:** inappropriate or poor management styles also contribute to resistance.

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.

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. This is a conclusion reached by a variety of researchers 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.

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 been completed and sufficient time has passed.

Resistance plays a crucial role in influencing the organisation toward greater stability. Resistance is a factor that can balance pressure from external and internal environments to encourage change 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. The challenge means to find the right balance between change and stability; avoiding the disfunctionality of too much change while ensuring stability does not become stagnation.

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 serve as a warning signal directing the timing of technological changes.

The 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.

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.

In addition to injecting energy into a change process, resistance also encourages the search for alternative methods and out-comes 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.

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 “good” change.

A lot of 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. 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. 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 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.

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.

Resistance to change is acknowledged as being a fundamental block to change, and a prime reason why change does not succeed or get implemented. Resistance is caused by a number of factors, such as:

- *Individual factors*: personality factors (high need for control, locus of control, need for achievement etc.); attitudes based on previous experiences of change.

- *Group factors*: group cohesiveness, social norms, and participation in decision-making.

- *Organisational factors*: threats presented by the unknown; challenges to the status quo; workload consequences.

There are many reasons why people inside organisations resist change; indeed, it is possible for the entire system which the organisation represents, to be resistant to change if the preparation for change has not been carried out in a manner that does not correctly

prepare the organisation for it. Various types of resistance have been identified (e.g. Kanter, 1985), see Table 1.

Table 1- Factors causing resistance of change

Cause	Outline
Fear of the unknown	Being uncertain about the nature of a change, feeling that you do not know what is going on and what the future is likely to hold
Loss of control	Feeling that the change is being done to you, not by you, worrying that you have no say in the situation and the events taking place
Loss of face	Feeling embarrassed by the change and viewing it as a testimony that the way you have done things in the past was wrong
Loss of competency	Feeling that existing skills and competencies will no longer be of any use after the change
Need for security	Worrying what your role will be after the change
Poor timing	Being caught by surprise with a change that has been sprung on you, or being asked to change at a time when you already feel overworked
Force of habit	Not liking to change existing ways of doing things, feeling comfortable in existing routines and habits
Lack of support	Lacking important support from direct supervisors and/or organisation, not having the correct resources to properly implement the change
Lack of confidence	Lacking in personal confidence that things, once changed, really will be better than before
Lingering resentment	Being recalcitrant because of a lack of respect for the people involved and/or because of anger over the way you have been treated during past change efforts

Source: Victoria J. Mabin, Steve Forgeson, 2001

In order to harness the positive utility in resistance, we need to first treat resistance as positive, and we need to be proactive in dealing with resistance. In order to do this, we need to understand the issues, and the underlying causes of resistance surrounding change. Though, managers need to engage others in the process to identify resistance in its various forms, and to test and hone change strategies and action plans, to enable a full, complete and successful implementation that has buy-in from everyone involved. It appears that this approach may well provide a management model that incorporates the utility of resistance positively, actively, and directly.

3. Conclusions

Resistance remains to this day a complex, multifaceted 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.

The 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, 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. Managers should be encouraged to search for alternative methods of introducing the change. They must communicate and consult regularly with their employees. This is 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.

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