

Ten Reasons People Resist Change

by

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Leadership is about change, but what is a leader to do when faced with ubiquitous resistance? Resistance to change manifests itself in many ways, from foot-dragging and inertia to petty sabotage to outright rebellions. The best tool for leaders of change is to understand the predictable, universal sources of resistance in each situation and then strategize around them. Here are the ten I've found to be the most common.

Loss of control. Change interferes with autonomy and can make people feel that they've lost control over their territory. It's not just political, as in who has the power. Our sense of self-determination is often the first things to go when faced with a potential change coming from someone else. Smart leaders leave room for those affected by change to make choices. They invite others into the planning, giving them ownership.

Excess uncertainty. If change feels like walking off a cliff blindfolded, then people will reject it. People will often prefer to remain mired in misery than to head toward an unknown. As the saying goes, "Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know." To overcome inertia requires a sense of safety as well as an inspiring vision. Leaders should create certainty of process, with clear, simple steps and timetables.

Surprise, surprise! Decisions imposed on people suddenly, with no time to get used to the idea or prepare for the consequences, are generally resisted. It's always easier to say *No* than to say *Yes*. Leaders should avoid the temptation to craft changes in secret and then announce them all at once. It's better to plant seeds — that is, to sprinkle hints of what might be coming and seek input.

Everything seems different. Change is meant to bring something different, but how different? We are creatures of habit. Routines become automatic, but change jolts us into consciousness, sometimes in uncomfortable ways. Too many differences can be distracting or confusing. Leaders should try to minimize the number of unrelated differences introduced by a central change. Wherever possible keep things familiar. Remain focused on the important things; avoid change for the sake of change.

Loss of face. By definition, change is a departure from the past. Those people associated with the last version — the one that didn't work, or the one that's being superseded — are likely to be defensive about it. When change involves a big shift of strategic direction, the people responsible for the previous direction dread the perception that they must have been wrong. Leaders can help people maintain dignity by celebrating those elements of the past that are worth honoring, and making it clear that the world has changed. That makes it easier to let go and move on.

Concerns about competence. Can I do it? Change is resisted when it makes people feel stupid. They might express skepticism about whether the new software version will work or whether digital journalism is really an improvement, but down deep they are worried that their skills will be obsolete. Leaders should over-invest in structural reassurance, providing abundant information, education, training, mentors, and support systems. A period of overlap, running two systems simultaneously, helps ease transitions.

More work. Here is a universal challenge. Change is indeed more work. Those closest to the change in terms of designing and testing it are often overloaded, in part because of the inevitable unanticipated glitches in the middle of change, per “Kanter’s Law” that “everything can look like a failure in the middle.” Leaders should acknowledge the hard work of change by allowing some people to focus exclusively on it, or adding extra perks for participants (meals? valet parking? massages?). They should reward and recognize participants — and their families, too, who often make unseen sacrifices.

Ripple effects. Like tossing a pebble into a pond, change creates ripples, reaching distant spots in ever-widening circles. The ripples disrupt other departments, important customers, people well outside the venture or neighborhood, and they start to push back, rebelling against changes they had nothing to do with that interfere with their own activities. Leaders should enlarge the circle of stakeholders. They must consider all affected parties, however distant, and work with them to minimize disruption.

Past resentments. The ghosts of the past are always lying in wait to haunt us. As long as everything is steady state, they remain out of sight. But the minute you need cooperation for something new or different, the ghosts spring into action. Old wounds reopen, historic resentments are remembered — sometimes going back many generations. Leaders should consider gestures to heal the past before sailing into the future.

Sometimes the threat is real. Now we get to true pain and politics. Change is resisted because it can hurt. When new technologies displace old ones, jobs can be lost; prices can be cut; investments can be wiped out. The best thing leaders can do when the changes they seek pose significant threat is to be honest, transparent, fast, and fair. For example, one big layoff with strong transition assistance is better than successive waves of cuts.

Although leaders can’t always make people feel comfortable with change, they can minimize discomfort. Diagnosing the sources of resistance is the first step toward good solutions. And feedback from resisters can even be helpful in improving the process of gaining acceptance for change.