

RESISTANCE TO ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE; LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT:

NORMALLY, RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE HAS BEEN SEEN AS ADVERSARIAL – THE ENEMY OF CHANGE THAT MUST BE DEFEATED IF CHANGE IS TO BE SUCCESSFUL. WHILE IT IS APPARENT THAT CLASSICAL MANAGEMENT THEORY VIEWED RESISTANCE IN SUCH A MANNER, RECENT LITERATURE CONTAINS MUCH EVIDENCE THAT SUGGESTS RESISTANCE MAY INDEED BE USEFUL AND IS NOT TO BE SIMPLY DISCOUNTED. PRESENT DAY SUGGESTIONS AND PRESCRIPTIONS FOR MANAGING RESISTANCE HAVE EVIDENTLY DISREGARDED THIS RESEARCH AND LEFT LITTLE ROOM FOR UTILITY IN RESISTANCE. THIS PAPER ARGUES THAT 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 BENEFIT FROM TECHNIQUES THAT CAREFULLY MANAGE RESISTANCE TO CHANGE BY LOOKING FOR WAYS OF UTILISING IT RATHER THAN OVERCOMING IT.[1]

KEY WORDS: RESISTANCE TO CHANGE, ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE, ORGANISATIONS, EMPLOYEES, MANAGEMENT.

Individuals go through a reaction process when they are personally confronted with major organisational change (Jacobs, 1995; Kyle, 1993)[1][2]. According to Scott and Jaffe (1988) this process consists of four phases: initial denial, resistance, gradual exploration, and eventual commitment. Unconscious processes arise as individuals respond to the threats of change. Individuals unconsciously use well-developed and habitual defence mechanisms to protect themselves from change and from the feelings of anxiety change causes). These defences can sometimes obstruct and hinder an individual from adapting to change .[3]

Adapting to changing goals and demands has been a timeless challenge for organizations, but the task seems to have become even more crucial in the past decade. In the for-profit sector, global population growth and political shifts have opened new markets for products and services at a dizzying pace. To respond to the pace of change, organizations are adopting flatter, more agile structures and more empowering, team-oriented cultures. As status differences erode, some employees are coming to expect involvement in decisions about organizational change. Successful organizational adaptation is increasingly reliant on generating employee support and enthusiasm for proposed changes, rather than merely overcoming resistance.[4] The concept of resistance to change has been widely studied, but it has limitations. Both Merron[5] (1993) and

Dent and Goldberg[6] (1999) have argued for retiring the phrase "resistance to change." The limitations of the concept can be framed in philosophical terms; for instance, critical theorists and labor policy scholars argue that the interests of managers should not be privileged over the interests of workers when studying organizational change[4]. My purpose here is to summarize a critique of existing views of resistance to change and to advocate a view that captures more of the complexity of individuals' responses to proposed organizational changes.

Schein (1988) believes resistance to change to be one of the most ubiquitous of organisational phenomena.[7] A number of authors have defined resistance. For example, Ansoff defines resistance as a multifaceted phenomenon, which introduces unanticipated delays, costs and instabilities into the process of a strategic change[8], whilst Zaltman and Duncan define resistance as any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo[9]. Thus, resistance, in an organisational setting, is an expression of reservation which normally arises as a response or reaction to change [10]. This expression is normally witnessed by management as any employee actions perceived as attempting to stop, delay, or alter change [11] Thus resistance is most commonly linked with negative employee attitudes or with counter-productive behaviours.

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 wellbeing of the organisation.[11] Resistance quickly became understood as the enemy of change, the foe which causes a change effort to be drawn out by factional dissent and in-fighting. 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[11]. Early human resource theory also cast resistance in a negative light by perceiving it as a form of conflict that was indicative of a breakdown in the normal and healthy interactions that can exist between individuals and groups. Once again, the prescription was to avoid resistance in order to restore harmony to the organization[12]. 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. Rather than being simply driven by the parochial self-interest of individual employees, this research concluded that resistance was a function of a variety of social factors, including[11]:

- 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. Such differences of opinion cast doubt in the employees' mind as to the merit or worth of the changes, and thus they may choose to stand in opposition or voice concern.

- Non-rational factors: the reaction of an individual worker to a proposed change is also a function of predispositions and preferences which are not necessarily based on an economic-rational assessment of the change. These may include instances of resistance workers who

simply do not wish to move offices, prefer working near a particular friend, or are uncertain of the outcomes of implementing new technology).

- 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. As a result of this research, resistance to change became recognised for what it truly is: a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that is caused by a variety of factors. Furthermore, a consensus of opinion began to form that, contrary to classical theory, resistance (and the conflict that it can cause) may not be an enemy of change. Rather, there is a strong case that suggests that resistance should not be approached adversarially because it can play a useful role in an organisational change effort.[11]

Hultman (1979, p. 54) writes that “Unfortunately, when the word resistance is mentioned, we tend to ascribe negative connotations to it. This is a misconception. There are many times when resistance is the most effective response available.”[13] Waddell, D., & Sohal, A. S. (1998) considered that” 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. Nevertheless, it is a conclusion reached by a variety of authors 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. First of all, resistance points out that it is a fallacy to consider change itself to be inherently good.”[11] 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[13]. To this end, resistance plays a crucial role in influencing the organisation toward greater stability. While pressure from external and internal environments continue to encourage change, resistance is a factor that can balance these demands against the need for constancy and stability.[11] 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. Thus, the system is able to gain a certain momentum or rhythm that is also critical for organisational survival[13]. While these maintenance needs are widely recognised, the emphasis in the literature certainly remains on the requirements of change and dynamism. The challenge therefore is to find the right balance between change and stability; avoiding the dysfunctionality of too much change while ensuring stability does not become stagnation. As our understanding of resistance has become increasingly clear, it has also become apparent that people do not resist change per se, rather they resist the uncertainties and potential outcomes that change can cause[11]. 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 [therefore] serve as a warning signal directing the timing of technological changes [11]. As such, resistance plays a crucial role in drawing attention to aspects of change that may be inappropriate, not well thought through, or perhaps plain wrong. Either way, it is the organisation’s method of communication, therefore attempting to eliminate resistance as soon as

it arises is akin to shooting the messenger who delivers bad news. Specifically, [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

In combination, 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. The legislative process, for example, is predicated upon resistance playing a crucial role in ensuring the best possible laws are produced. Resistance, in the form of rivalry between (at least) two parties, injects energy into the process and sparks debate where opinions differ. Resistance encourages greater scrutiny of legislation. It prompts the search for a variety of alternatives and evaluates these with greater rigour. [16] It also means that the implementation process will be considered carefully, thereby improving the adoption of these changes by the general public.[11]

Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) argue it is important to diagnose human resistance when implementing change and in order to diagnose the true cause it is necessary to understand the individual.[14] Olson (1990) suggests that to effect organisational change, it is sometimes necessary to go beyond the outward aspects of an individual’s behaviour and address the unconscious motivations so as to achieve a change of attitude.[15] When implementing significant change, management needs to be aware of how defence mechanisms are associated with an individual’s behavioural intentions. Once the benefits of working with the human dimension are understood and accepted, management will be more inclined to develop, promote and implement appropriate intervention strategies.[3] Two types of intervention strategies are proposed to assist management to work with individual resistance. These are information-based interventions and counselling interventions. Information-based interventions provide the individual with information to create awareness and understanding of unconscious processes and how these influence an individual’s motivations and behaviours in a changing environment. Information-based interventions ideally need to be supported by counselling interventions. Counselling interventions focus on activities designed to assist individuals, both singularly and collectively as a group, to analyse, interpret and understand how their own defence mechanisms influence their perceptions and motivations towards change.[17] In conclusion, the outcomes of this research have provided further support for adopting a balanced approach to implementing change.[3] Rather than focussing attention and energy only on technical aspects, it is equally important for management to work with the human factors associated with resistance to aid the change process. These human factors include unconscious processes such as defence mechanisms. Intervention strategies are needed to assist an individual to identify and interpret their own perceptions of change, thus creating greater personal awareness and understanding of self. This personal growth and development is likely to alter an individual’s perceptions of organisational change, thereby reducing the level of resistance.

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