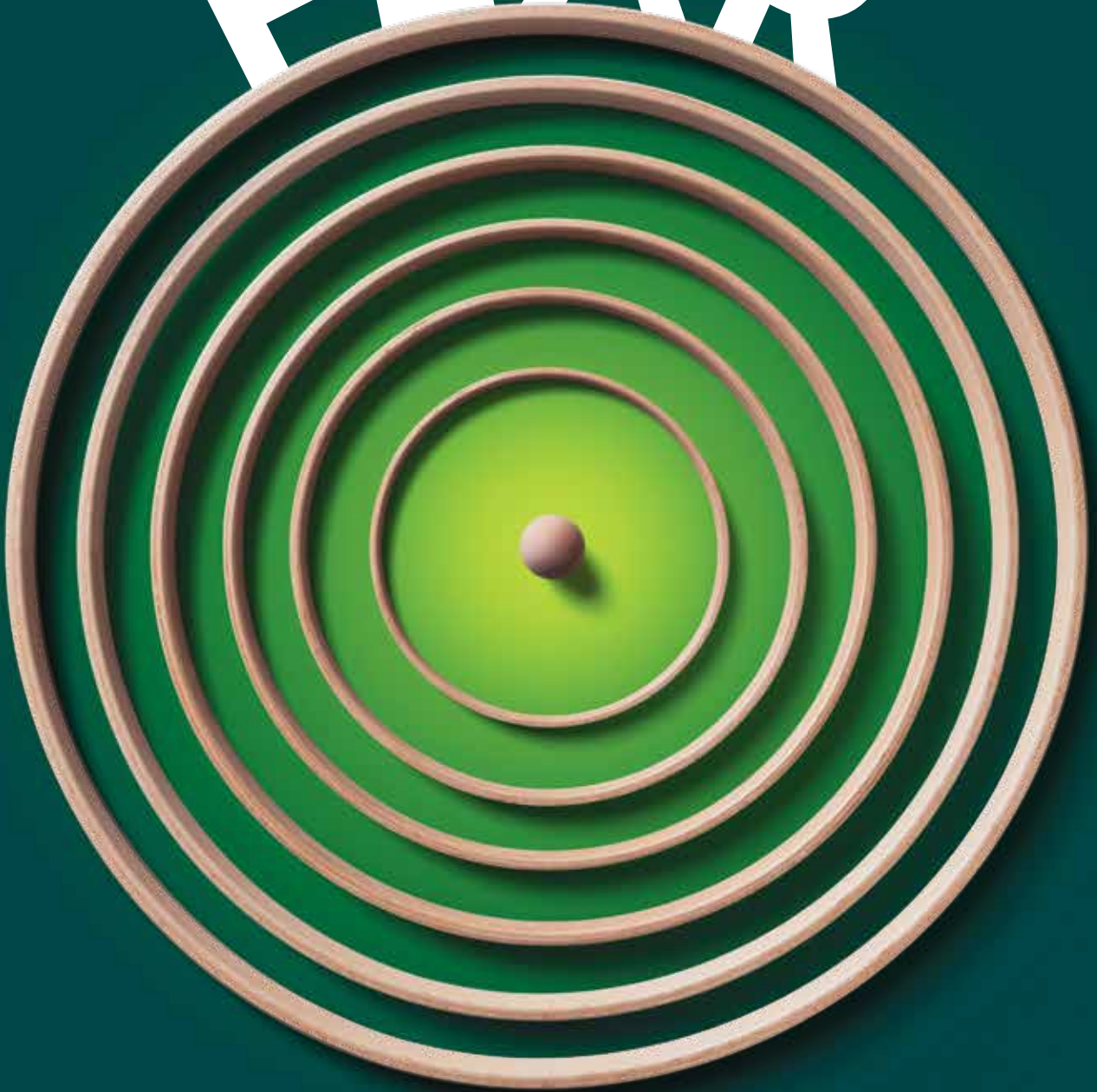


FEAR



Managing employee resistance to change initiatives
by Santosh Mishra and Natella Isazada

OF THE UNKNOWN

JUST THE FACTS

In today's world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, change is inevitable. But many change initiatives are met with employee resistance. The more comfortable and invested employees are in the current state, the more likely they are to resist anything that may change that.

Resistance can't be eliminated, but it can be reduced with the right approach. The authors address the key component of successful change management, and provide tips and advice for better managing resistance to change.



“People are not stressed because there is too much change in organizations but because of the way change is made.”

—Peter Drucker¹

Change management (CM) has been the talk around boardrooms for more than two decades. In today’s world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, change is inevitable; it’s our new normal. Table 1 (p. 30) summarizes the top forces stimulating organizational change.²

According to a PricewaterhouseCoopers survey, 76% of CEOs said their ability to adapt to new changes will be a key source of competitive advantage in the future.³ Change is something that can’t be wished away, yet there is no perfect way to introduce and manage change. It also is reported that 70% of CM projects are unsuccessful.⁴ There are many variables and moving parts, and unless all are aligned, success is unlikely. This trend will continue if we keep focusing on the symptoms of the problem rather than the root cause.

One of the strongest human emotions is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. Change, by definition, brings with it many unknowns. So, we must look more closely at the human fear of uncertainty and find ways to address it.

One study reported that 39% of change failures are due to employee resistance to change.⁵ Human behavior in organizations does not work the way many executives think it does. So, seeing change as an oversimplified version of Kurt Lewin’s well-known unfreeze-change-refreeze model, shown in Figure 1 (p. 31), doesn’t consider that change is not always a rational process. It’s true that firm before-change and after-change points exist, but everything in between is nonlinear. So, how can we explain resistance?

This article addresses what we see as the key component of successful CM, namely managing resistance. We focus on practical aspects based on our experiences, and provide tips and advice on better managing resistance to change.

Is it psychological or physiological?

Research on brain function shows that resistance is not only a psychological reaction to change, but also a physiological reaction. We must understand the physiological connection to appreciate why we resist.

Located above the orbitofrontal cortex—the eyes—where error signals are generated, there is a small organ called the

amygdala, which controls the brain’s fear circuitry. Error detection signals can push people to become emotional and act more impulsively. Animal instinct takes over. Trying to change a routine behavior causes the brain to send a strong message that something is not right. This message grabs the individual’s attention and can overpower rational thought.⁶

Anatomy of resistance

Resistance originates from fear, prejudice, anxiety and ignorance. People fear the unknown and are comforted by the familiar. The more comfortable and invested employees are in the current state, the more likely they are to ignore or sabotage the reasons for change.

When people resist change, they resist the prospect of losing what they have and hold dear—whether it’s losing the control they currently hold, their comfort zone, their job security or opportunities. They may fear an increased workload with unrealistic new demands and tight timelines. It does not help if past failures cause employees to distrust the champion of the current initiative.

To better understand the anatomy, the entire process is laid out in Online Figure 1, which can be found on this article’s webpage at qualityprogress.com.

Change is a process, not an event. Time will elongate if it is not managed properly, and the process may never reach the upslope predicted in Online Figure 1. Resistance cannot be brought to zero, no matter how hard you try, but it can be reduced with the right approach. Discussed later are suggested practices based on our experience in leading change initiatives.

Emotional baggage

People experience change on an individual level well before they begin seeing it at an organizational level. Sometimes, the fear of the unknown makes people cling to the old methods without questioning their effectiveness, efficiency or even adequacy.

Overtaken by anxiety, employees are quick to resist the change without giving it a chance or fully understanding the benefits it offers. This often originates from a lack of clear communication around the subject. Lack of leadership communication on the vision and strategy leaves room for

rumors, which in turn feed into people's negative emotions toward the change. This especially affects people who bring into the workplace heavy baggage of past failures and unresolved resentment.

For example, we once had a manufacturing employee who saw any change as an immediate threat to his job. You may call it an overreaction, but with any change to company processes, written procedures, equipment or technology, he suspected there would be personnel cuts and that he would be the first one out the door.

A change to the company's job traveler process threw him off completely. He panicked and started a series of rumors—and backed up those rumors with vivid stories of disregard and mistreatment he had just experienced at his previous job, which was going through a similar change.

Only through numerous discussions and coaching sessions did it become clear that the damaging experience this person kept referring to had taken place at least 15 years earlier. But to him, those memories were still fresh. This person relived the effects of his past trauma every time a change in the workplace triggered him. It took a lot of effort to help him get over his fears and anxieties about change.

It requires a lot of work and dedication from leaders to understand what's behind the resistance, especially when it emanates from past experiences. Speaking about those experiences helps.

Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan, authors of *The Three Laws of Performance*, point out that people are constrained by what they aren't saying. When they can address and articulate what has been holding them back, space begins to open.⁷

A change in organizational culture is paramount to creating a safe space to discuss the underlying issues behind resistance. Building a culture of open communication and employee engagement is an important piece of the puzzle, and is highly correlated to the success of the change initiative. Cultural change must involve and engage all layers of the organization because they each carry an important role in ensuring the change initiative succeeds.

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Middle management holds the key

Middle managers are pivotal to any change initiative, and therefore, they require special attention. For middle managers, change is neither sought after nor welcome. It is disruptive and intrusive, and upsets the balance.

Though often unwritten, the psychological dimension underpins a manager's personal commitment to individual and organizational objectives. This gives a different message to their subordinates who take the cue readily.

As helpful as it would be to have middle managers on board with promoting the change to the rest of the team, the amount of work they already have on their plates cannot be underestimated. They must manage daily operations and allocate resources to ensure the timely progress of all existing projects and uninterrupted workflow throughout the organization. The change initiative creates extra work for them, and they must manage it without any additional resources. Is this extra workload manageable, or is it putting unreasonable strain on middle management?

If nothing comes off their workload, middle managers may still say yes to the executives, but when they flounder, the consequence eventually will show. If they cannot resist openly, there always will be a risk of stalling progress in other ways. For a while, there could be a false impression of things going well—and senior executives will believe it. But in reality, things will not be moving in the right direction to realize the intended benefits of the change.

Resistance to change from mid-level managers directly contributes to employee resistance. When workers see their managers give a half-hearted effort to the change, they will have a hard time taking the change seriously. Commitment from management must come first because managers are directly responsible for implementing the change. All stakeholders of affected processes must demonstrate that the proposed change is beneficial and, at a bare minimum, not harmful to the business.

System approach

Because effects of the change may spread inside and outside the organization, any new initiative must be reviewed from the perspective of constraints it may impose on the organization or its parts. This also includes constraints due to existing agreements, such as union contracts, vendor contracts and commitments to existing policies.

A system is a set of interconnected parts forming a complex whole. It's also a set of detailed methods, procedures and routines created to perform a specific activity or resolve a specific issue. An organization is a system relating to other systems, contained within its industry and society. Any proposed change usually is aimed at changing a business process to increase value for the business and its customers. A change in any one process has complex consequences for various parts of the system.

TABLE 1

Six forces for stimulating organizational change

Force	Examples
Nature of the workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More culture diversity Aging population Increased immigration and outsourcing
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faster, cheaper and more mobile computers and handheld devices Emergence and growth of social media networking sites Deciphering of the human genomic code
Economic shocks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rise and fall of global housing market Financial sector collapse Global recession
Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global competitors Mergers and consolidations Increased government regulation of commerce
Social trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased environmental awareness Liberalization of attitudes toward gay, lesbian and transgender people More multitasking and connectivity
World politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rising healthcare costs Negative social attitudes toward business and executives Opening of markets in China



IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT

For more on improving employee engagement, check out the ASQ webcast “Lean Tools to Improve Employee Engagement.” Lonnie Wilson, a lean manufacturing and cultural transformation expert, presents a mini-workshop on how to leverage lean tools and the catchall method to substantially improve strategic deployment. Watch the webcast at <https://tinyurl.com/employee-engagement-webcast>.

Exercising a system approach thoroughly analyzes what and who will be affected by the change, and how. What are the repercussions of the change on other processes? This includes direct and indirect processes, as well as those spreading beyond the boundaries of the organization. What are some of the potential conflicts with the existing priorities?

The easiest way to adopt this

approach is by reviewing change from the perspective of resource allocation. Start by asking yourself: Are there any parallel projects that will be affected by or have an effect on the change I am managing? Will we have to pull resources from those projects to accommodate the change? Pulling resources and forcing people to stretch thin is a definite way to fuel resistance.

The initial changes usually bring the most tangible results. After the most apparent problems are solved, further changes will be incremental, resulting in less visible benefits. With this, you may start paying less attention to the possible implications of the changes in other areas. But you must follow through with the systems approach until the end to remain aware of any potential bottlenecks.

Tips and advice for managing resistance

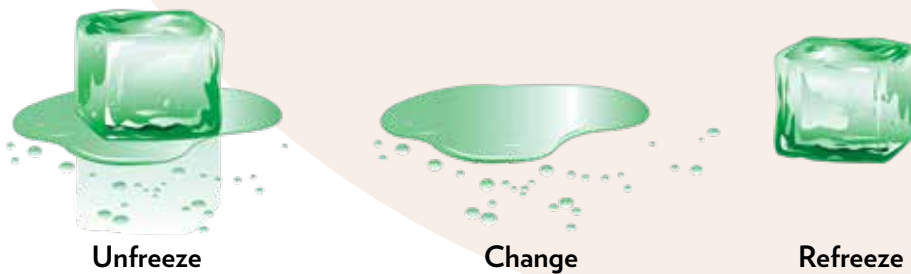
For the change to become a permanent part of the corporate culture, resistance must be controlled by accounting for all factors that contribute to it. Unless people rally behind the change and feel the desire to support it, results will be half-hearted. Change only happens if you can create that conviction and desire. That is where you should focus your efforts—explaining the burning platform behind the change. To overcome their indecision and confusion, people need a clear destination. Create that crystal-clear picture of the desired future state so your valuable time and resources aren't wasted.

If the change initiative fails because of communication breakdown, develop a strategy for communicating key information. Don't assume that all the right people will somehow find out everything they must know regarding the change. If you don't manage the communication channels properly, people will rely on the grapevine for information. Over-communicating the vision always is preferred to under-communicating.

People often resist because they are more focused on what they might lose as a result of the change. It's the job of leaders to reorient the focus and show people what can be gained instead. Bumps in the road are expected, but here are some helpful tips to effectively manage the change:

FIGURE 1

Kurt Lewin's change management model



- Engage the right resistance managers, sponsors and champions. Increase their awareness skills (58% of sponsors do not understand their roles⁸).
- Engage middle managers in particular. Demonstrate your commitment to the change by removing barriers and providing resources.
- Focus on identifying, creating and rewarding new desired behaviors.
- Ensure constant feedback from resistors; create that framework and safe space.
- Share success. Over-communicate the vision and small wins.
- Explain why (the business need) repeatedly, including the consequences of maintaining the current state.
- Invest time and effort on desire. The awareness, desire, knowledge, ability and reinforcement model/sequence is important.⁹
- Provide simple, clear choices and consequences so ownership shifts to the individual.
- Try to convert the strongest dissenters, but do not focus time and energy on only them because the outcome is limited. Instead, focus on those who are enthusiastic about the change and see value in the change.
- Keep up hope and a positive spirit, and make a personal appeal.

Managing success

Change can be difficult, hard and arduous, nonlinear and unpredictable. In practice, it is far from the unfreeze-change-refreeze process. Resistance to change is a normal, human, physiological reaction that is to be expected. About 70% of change initiatives fail. One of the key contributors to failure is the half-hearted acceptance of middle managers and close to no involvement from top management.

But all is not lost—this reality can be reversed. With some of the tips provided, change initiatives can be managed to succeed.

According to research from Prosci, senior management participation and involvement have been consistently at the top of the success criteria for the past 20 years.¹⁰

The top three aspects that make any change initiative a success are:

1. Management explaining the “why” behind the change and outlining the consequences of not taking action toward the change effort.
2. Focusing on one change at a time and creating that desire. Change happens at individual levels only.
3. Treating all change initiatives like a formal project, with continuous communication and sustenance in mind.

With even a single successful project under your belt, you can navigate other changes with fewer impediments. **QP**

EDITOR'S NOTE

References contained in this article can be found on the article's webpage at qualityprogress.com.



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