

Managing Change Successfully: Six Layers of Resistance

By Samuel Okoro

Why is there resistance to change? Are people just naturally perverse, or are there concerns which if understood and correctly dealt with will create the buy-in required to turn resisters into supporters and generate the momentum needed to overcome the gravitational pull of the status quo?

There are six layers at which resistance can occur.

1. We Do Not Agree on the Problem

Go into any poorly performing organisation and ask people from various functions what the issues are. In all likelihood, within each function you will find different opinions as to what the problem is. The situation is not unlike the six blind men in the rhyme, who went to see the elephant. Each honestly describes his experience, but none of them captures the essence of the whole.

This is why different initiatives are launched in each department to try and solve the different problems. But if we remember that organisations are systems and departments/functions are interacting parts of a whole, we then realise a more holistic approach is needed. Through a combination of rigorous logic and experience based intuition, we build tight cause effect relationships that lead us to the core problem.

Usually disagreements as to the problem disappear once this approach is used.

2. We Do Not Agree on the Direction of the Solution

If a problem is long standing, its persistence indicates that there are conflicts preventing its successful resolution. An example of such a conflict is where management proclaims quality as number one and generally supports actions that guarantee quality until sales volumes are threatened. Then the quality mantra is quickly abandoned - especially if we are talking about the last quarter of the year. When the pressure eases early in the new year, quality becomes important again.

Another case is the conflict between delegation - to improve speed of operations and customer service on one hand, and control - to contain costs on the other hand.

By questioning the assumptions behind each of the conflicting positions, erroneous paradigms can be unearthed and thus the basis of the conflict eliminated. Thus a particular direction for solving agreed problems can be pursued. A powerful tool for resolving conflicts is the Evaporating Cloud which is part of the TOC logical tool set.

3. We Do Not Agree that the Proposed Solution Resolves the Problem

Even with the problem and the general direction of the solution agreed, it may be difficult to convince stakeholders that a particular solution completely solves the problem. In this case just as logical cause effect

relationships can be used to construct a diagram to represent the problem so also can they be used to construct a diagram logically relating the proposed solution to the new desired states.

Thus such a logical description can be used to convince stakeholders that all the original problems are eliminated when the solution is implemented.

4. Yes But... the Proposed Solution Will Create Other Problems

It is not unusual that the designer of the solution is blind to the shortcomings. So even though stakeholders now agree that the solution solves the stated problem, they may claim that it creates other problems in their place, like the case where eliminating a pest causes a proliferation of other undesirable creatures that it preyed upon.

The solution here is to acknowledge the concern and then work with those affected to eliminate it by the same logical process already described. Involvement of affected stakeholders creates even stronger buy-in. At this point every one is ready and willing to go ahead, but...

5. Yes But... there are Huge Obstacles to Implementing the Proposed Solution

The solutions proposed may require skills, resources, technologies, approvals that are currently unavailable. The obstacles are attacked in a step by step manner. The outcome of the process is a sequence of prerequisites needed to overcome the obstacle and thus implement the solution. At this point there is complete buy-in along with a plan for executing the required changes.

6. Unverbalised Fear

At the end of the day, any residual resistance is most likely due to unverbalised fear - a vague feeling of unease arising from the fact that we will be doing something entirely new. Leadership is what is needed here to provide the inspiration and confidence to go forth and just do it!

About the Author

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