

Resistance During Times of Organizational Change

MADJ Consulting Group is passionate about helping people and organizations partner together to enhance their capacity. Partnering with other organizations results in organizational growth and improvement, which means change. And change, even desired change, often encounters resistance. Seth Godin (1) uses the term resistance to refer to anything that serves to help maintain the status quo; maintaining the status quo is the exact opposite of change. When working with other organizations, you can expect to encounter resistance within your own organization and from within the organization(s) you are working with.

Resistance should not be seen as entirely negative or something to be avoided. Encountering resistance does not mean you should not work together, or that a partnership is not working. In fact, encountering resistance is often a sign you are on the right track. Think about the important role resistance plays when increasing muscle mass. Resistance is a necessary part of increasing muscle and physical strength. So too, effectively identifying and responding to resistance is essential to the overall growth of people and organizations.

Resistance takes many forms. Peter Block says, "The key to understanding the nature of resistance is to realize that resistance is a reaction to an emotional process taking place within [the person]." Below are some examples of ways resistance manifests itself in people and organizational cultures

- **Give me more detail** – Asking for more and more information rather than making decisions or taking action
- **Flood people with detail** – Providing way too much detail which can impede the change process
- **Avoidance** – Using a full schedule or other commitments to avoid the situation - putting you off, interruptions during meetings, showing up late, not following through on commitments etc.
- **Citing Impracticality** – Reminding you about the real world, and how your idea is either impacted by their "real world" information or cannot happen in their "real world"
- **Silence** – Lack of communication or engagement
- **Intellectualizing** – Talking about why (theory) to avoid or resist creating solutions
- **Saying Yes** – Total agreement is also a form of resistance, particularly when there is no action
- **Methodology** – Nit picking the methods you used to arrive at your suggestion or plan
- **Pressing for solutions** – Not wanting to talk about the problem at all – just wanting answers
- **Changing the Goal** – Desiring perfection to delay moving ahead, or deciding something is good enough and moving on too quickly



There is a tendency when facing resistance for leaders to provide more data and information, thinking lack of knowledge is the barrier to change. But resistance is rarely about knowledge, or logic. It is most likely to be rooted in emotion. Resistance is a predictable, natural, emotional reaction to change and the process of addressing difficult and challenging situations.

To effectively address and deal with resistance you must:

1. Be able to identify that it is happening
2. View it as natural, expected and a sign that change is happening
3. Not assign blame
4. Offer support to the person or group of people displaying resistant behaviours
5. Remember that the resistance behaviour is not about you personally or your competence as a leader. It is also not necessarily related to people's support of the change or project you are working on.

As a leader, you may feel it is your job to mitigate or eliminate the resistance feelings and behaviours of people in your organization or team. It is not your job to resolve the resistance you encounter; rather, it can be much more productive and effective for you to help people identify and name what you are experiencing. The next time you encounter resistance ask yourself the following questions:

- Are they feeling helpless or disengaged?
- Are they grieving something that is being lost because of the change?
- Are they overwhelmed by tasks associated with the change?

Then provide space for others to identify what they need to process their feelings, address their situation, and move forward with the change. This might take time. You may need to rethink your plans and timeline related to the activity, project, or partnership. Addressing resistance should not be rushed. And moving forward without addressing resistance will only result in additional challenges down the road.

References

1. <https://seths.blog/2023/09/widespread-resistance/>
2. Peter Block Flawless Consulting: 2nd Edition A guide to getting your expertise used. (2000)
3. <https://seths.blog/2023/11/project-resistance/>
4. The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles – Steven Pressfield.



When Resistance arises, and it always does, we
can see it, name it, and gently move on.

~Seth Godin~

