**WHAT IS RESISTANCE AND WHY SHOULD I CARE??????**

Nearly two-thirds of all major changes in organizations fail. According to Hammer and Champy only 20 to 30 percent of all reengineering projects succeed.¹

- Only 23 percent of all mergers and acquisitions make back their costs.²
- Just 43 percent of quality-improvement efforts make satisfactory progress.³
- 9 percent of all major software development applications in large organizations are worth the cost. 31 percent get cancelled before completion. 53 percent will result in cost overruns by 189 percent!⁴

Fortune 500 executives said that resistance was the primary reason changes failed.⁵ In a similar survey conducted by Deloitte Consulting, 80 percent of the Chief Information Officers surveyed said that resistance was the main reason why technology projects failed. Not lack of skill or resources, but that soft touchy-feely human reaction of resistance.

These survey results are only partially right. **Resistance is not the primary reason why changes fail. It is the reaction to resistance that creates the problems.** In other words, management's response when people resist a new initiative is often the event that hinders the change. For example, an executive announces that the company will begin reengineering. Employees and middle managers begin to resist. As the project unfolds, executives see resistance appear in many forms–malicious compliance, in-your-face arguments, even sabotage. The executives respond by pushing the change even harder. They threaten people. The executives resist the resistance. Employees only redouble their opposition and the war begins.

**What is Resistance?**

*Resistance is any force that slows or stops movement. It is not a negative force nor are there "resistors" out there just waiting to ruin our otherwise perfect intervention. People resist in response to something. Something that we (or our clients) are doing evokes a reaction that we call resistance. The people resisting probably don't see it as resistance; they see it as survival.*

Resistance is a natural part of change. It protects people from harm. As a beginning downhill skier, it is resistance that keeps me from taking the chair lift to the top of Bodycast Mountain. I have identified three levels of resistance. The better we are at identifying each of these Levels, the easier it will be to assist clients in creating strategies appropriate for the resistance they face.

**Level 1 – Based on Information**

This resistance is based on information. Facts, figures, ideas. It is the world of thinking and rational action. Level 1 is the world of presentations, diagrams, and logical arguments. Many
make the mistake of treating all resistance as if it were Level 1. In other words, they give people more information—better arguments, detailed facts—when something completely different is called for.

Level 1 may come from

- Lack of information
- Disagreement with the idea itself
- Lack of exposure
- Confusion

**Level 2 – Physiological and Emotional Reaction to This Change**

Level 2 is an emotional and physiological reaction to the change. Blood pressure rises, adrenaline flows, pulse increases. It is based on fear: people fear they will lose face, friends, even their jobs. In *The Emotional Brain*, Joseph LeDoux refers to this as "the fear response." It is physiological and uncontrollable. Level 2 can be triggered without conscious awareness.

LeDoux states that the emotions, not the intellect, are the most basic survival mechanism of all living organisms. They are what warns us of danger and allows us to take action instantly, before our conscious mind even knows what's going on. Imagine that you hear a loud crash as you read this sentence. You probably would cover your head and crouch instantly and only then would you look up to see where the sound came from. You would have taken those actions without your conscious mind considering what to do. If the ceiling had been caving in, there would not have been time for a thoughtful reaction. Your rapid instinctive reaction could have saved your life.

John Gottman's research on couples headed toward divorce found that as a person's pulse increases, his or her ability to listen diminishes. Even a 10 percent increase inhibits our ability to hear. When a person's pulse reaches 100 beats a minute (which is far below aerobic level for most people) conversations become terribly strained.

Imagine a client talking to her staff about a proposed restructuring. People ask Level 1 questions: How much will it cost? When will it begin? What's the timeline? Then the executive happens to mention that there is slight possibility that this could result in downsizing. Suddenly, two-thirds of the room drops to Level 2. She may as well quit going over slides that speak to the rational mind, these people are responding from a different part of the brain. The portion of the brain called the amygdala has warned them that this is dangerous and they are literally preparing for fight or flight—even if they aren't aware of it.
So, a meeting can continue as if everything was still Level 1. Polite questions are asked. Debates rage over budgets. But this all conceals the unspoken emotional reactions.

Level 2 may come from fear over a perceived . . .

- Loss of power or control
- Loss of status
- Loss of face or respect
- Feeling of incompetence
- Feeling of isolation or abandonment
- Sense that they can't take on anything else (too much change)

**Level 3 – Bigger Than the Current Change**

This is deeply entrenched stuff and is bigger than the ideas at hand. People are not resisting the idea – in fact, they may love the idea itself – they are resisting the client or you. They may resist because of their relationship with you or the client. History tells them to be wary. Level 3 is also the domain of cultural, religious, and racial differences. In other words, people may resist whom you represent.

Larry Young, an African-American Maryland state senator, was being investigated for possible misuse of campaign funds. The Maryland Senate voted to expel him, a strong and unprecedented action. A less surprising response would have been to censure him. The votes in favor of expulsion came mostly from whites; his support came mostly from blacks.

In situations like this, each group wonders why the other side can’t see the situation for what it truly is. Each side believes that the other is wrong. Even when confronted with the fact that our opinion is exactly what one would expect from someone of our race, we still can’t see it. We think it is based on a sound dispassionate assessment of the facts. When we are locked in a Level 3 difference, it is difficult to see how our race, culture, sexual orientation, or religion limits our ability to see other points of view. When we are operating in a Level 3 situation it is unlikely that we can put much value on the ideas and opinions of the other side. In these instances, believing is seeing.

Level 3 may come from . . .

- Personal history of mistrust
- Cultural, ethnic, racial, gender differences
- Significant disagreement over values
- Transference. The person being resisted represents someone else such as a
mother or father.

The Challenge of Resistance

Even when managers want to take resistance seriously and deal with it responsibly, most strategies are Level 1. There is a belief that if they give people just a little more information then they will certainly come around. Newsletters, videos, and PowerPoint are all Level 1 approaches. There is nothing wrong with presentations if people are confused or need more facts, but Level 1 tactics seldom work at Level 2 and 3.

Israeli statesman Abba Eban once said, "Men and nations behave wisely, once they've exhausted all other alternatives." The purpose of this article is to help you act wisely before you try out all those other alternatives.

Adapted from Rick Mauer's web site www.beyondresistance.com.

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