Managing Resistance to Change

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ABSTRACT

WHILE SOME RESISTANCE TO CHANGE is inevitable, this article suggests that inept management strategies can often cause the normal unease associated with a change to accelerate into more severe problems. Reasons for negative reactions to change are explored and practical solutions, based on findings of research studies, are offered.

INTRODUCTION

One of the best recent articles on the subject of change was published in 1986 by Sara Fine. One of Fine's most relevant points is that resistance to change is inevitable, and management must be prepared to respond to it (Fine, 1986).

Fine's research shows that "human beings tend to resist change, even when change represents growth and development...[and will lead to] greater efficiency and productivity. [Since] changes in an organization affect the individuals within that organization, and individuals...have the power to facilitate or thwart the implementation of an innovation (Fine, 1986, p. 84).

Why do employees resist change? Primarily because they fear the unknown. That is, they feel anxiety about how the change will affect them, their job performance, their relationship with other employees, and other job related factors. In fact, psychologists say that fear of the unknown is a rational, rather than an irrational, response to change. A small amount of uneasiness is to be expected from most people when the status quo shifts, simply because people need time to adjust their

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LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 53-61

thinking, their job performance, and their social relationships to any changes made.

Thus, resistance to change is inevitable, and managers must allow for some resistance when they are planning to implement change. Indeed, some resistance to change may even be positive because it slows down the speed with which innovation might otherwise proceed and allows time for people to adjust to it (Fine, 1986, pp. 88-89).

Unfortunately, resistance to change sometimes goes beyond a healthy unease for the unknown, as some researchers have discovered. Nancy Feldman (1972) studied a series of changes in the Tulsa Public Library system and found the following types of employee resistance: task avoidance or postponement, hostility (stated or unstated), resignation, and underproduction (meeting only the minimum expectations of one's work). A few years later, other library researchers found several more indicators of employee resistance to change: increased absenteeism, increased employee impatience, frustration, and sabotage (Plate & Stone, 1974; Veaner, 1974).

To manage change effectively, administrators must understand why an employee's initial reaction to a new proposal, that is, uneasiness and fear of the unknown, sometimes accelerates into more negative behavior like decreased job performance or sabotage.

What Causes Negative Behavior in Employees

Fine (1986) implies that a major cause of this acceleration is inept management (pp. 91-92). This article will, therefore, explore two questions: Can managers actually increase employee levels of resistance to change through poor planning, lack of support, or ignorance of employee needs? And, if so, how can managers avoid doing this in the future?

General Uncertainty about the Effects of Change

Let us scrutinize the general uncertainty which people experience when a major change is announced by a hypothetical example. Upper managers in an academic library are concerned because employees do not have enough time to evaluate the library's collection. These managers are quite altruistic; they want to try to make their employees' jobs easier by bringing in a consultant to conduct the evaluation for them.

Sherry, the head of collection development, is asked to make this a top priority. Since she has not worked out all the details of who the consultant will be and what he will do, she makes a simple bald statement at the end of her next staff meeting. The statement is this: a consultant will be brought in to evaluate the library's collection, review collection development policies, and make suggestions for improving collection development efforts. Sherry does not encourage discussion about the matter because the meeting has already run over in time. When staff try to briefly question the need, she says upper management has asked her to implement this change and that she will try to answer people's questions later.

George is one of sixteen employees responsible for collection development at this library. He has a number of immediate reactions to the suggested change—that is, to the consultant's presence. He wants to know who the consultant will be and what is the consultant's level of expertise. He wants to know why management feels a consultant is necessary (e.g., does management feel the current collection development staff is doing a bad job?). He also wants to know whether the consultant will discuss matters fully with current staff before making decisions which will affect them and how any changes suggested will affect patron service in the long run.

George's boss, Sherry, is too busy with her normal work and with making arrangements for the consultant's visit to answer his questions. George's initial reaction to the announcement is uneasiness, but as Sherry continues to ignore his needs for more complete information on the topic, he begins to feel that she is hiding something from him. His anxiety about the consultant's presence grows. By the time the consultant arrives, George's stress about the situation has grown so much that he is unwilling to listen to any of the consultant's suggestions. Instead he tries to undermine the consultant's advice by disagreeing with everything.

In this case, Sherry has handled the introduction of the new change poorly. She has failed to see the extent of George's uneasiness about this change and to provide him and other employees with appropriate information to ease these fears.

The literature of librarianship, of management, and of personnel psychology shows that employees respond better to change when management consciously tries to ease employee fears in a number of ways (Werbel, 1983; Weinbach, 1986; Malinconico, 1983).

First, management should provide as much advance information about the actual change as possible. Sherry did not. She hadn't worked out all the details herself and may have been afraid of looking inept in front of her staff if she said this. But she should have provided as much information as possible and not worried about the details at this point.

Second, management should fully inform affected employees of the reasons behind the change. In the case mentioned, management is trying to help employees by providing a person to perform a task which they have not had time to do. Since this rationale is not made clear, George assumes management is criticizing the ability of the staff to evaluate the collection and reacts accordingly.

Third, management should do everything possible to clarify employees' questions about the changes. Sherry did not realize how serious George's uneasiness about the change was. Thus she did not take the time to answer his questions, unwittingly making the situation worse.

Fourth, management should give employees time to reflect on how the proposed change will affect them, the organization as a whole, and their clientele. Sherry, told by upper management that bringing in the consultant is a top priority, rushes to do this rather than discussing matters fully with her staff and trying to give them time to adjust to the change.

In other words, workers who receive clear information about how a change will directly affect the organization and their role within it will accept change significantly better than those who do not receive this information.

A second example might make this even clearer. A 1985 article by two communications researchers described the results of a study of a government agency which was anticipating a move to a new office building (Miller, 1985). The employees had always worked in traditional offices, but management was asking them to move to a new building which used open landscaping. The move represented an environmental shift which could radically alter processes for accomplishing work (Miller, 1985, p. 371). Six weeks before the move, management had provided little information to the employees about the change even though it had been planned for some time.

The researchers asked senior management at this agency if they could experiment with the levels of information employees got about the move. In effect, the researchers wanted to verify the fact that giving employees clear information in advance would help them adapt better to the change. But the researchers had a second purpose too. They wanted to see whether employees would respond differently if they were given positive information about the move than if they were given negative information.

They did this by emphasizing for one set of departments positive aspects of the move (e.g., more up-to-date furniture and equipment). For another set, they emphasized negative aspects (e.g., the lack of privacy in the open environment). They gave no information to a third set.

The researchers expected to find that employees would adapt to change better when they received positive information about the change and they did. However, employees who had received negative information about the move responded more positively than employees who had received no clarifying information at all. That is, workers who received clarifying information about a change accepted it significantly better than those who did not *even when they viewed the change as a negative one.*

These findings clearly reinforce the idea that managers should share as much information about a proposed change as they can, even if there are negative aspects. That is, when the director of a small medical library is told his budget will be cut by 15 percent next year, he should not try to keep the information under cover. Rather, he should share the news with the staff and then work to keep them informed of and involved about what changs will have to be made to stay within the budget and how these changes will affect them individually.

Uncertainty about Job Performance

Another reason for employee fear of change is uncertainty about new work-related expectations associated with job performance. Specifically, the employee fears that he may not have enough skill to perform the changed task.

A recent study supports this by showing that individuals with experience performing a specific task one way will resist change more than individuals with less experience (Sagie et al., 1985). This was discovered in an experiment where two groups of high school students were asked to complete a series of simple manual tasks where they were rewarded for correct performance. One group was given more experience than the other, and developed more skill at the tasks. They were then asked to adopt automated procedures for these tasks. The students with more experience resisted automation significantly more than those with less experience. This was because the experienced group of workers had a higher degree of confidence in their ability to do the job in the old (i.e., manual) way; when they were asked to automate, their initial anxiety was higher. The levels of uncertainty about performance for students with little experience in their jobs did not change when they were asked to automate. This was because they were still a bit unsure about their performance in the manual task and were thus more receptive to trying new work methods.

This research implies that managers need to follow two strategies when introducing new tasks. First, they need to provide employees with exact information about what the changed tasks will be because knowledge reduces fear. Second, managers need to reassure their employees that they will develop the skills to do these tasks. The latter can be accomplished if workers receive adequate and complete training and receive reassurance that they will not be punished if their performance levels drop initially while relearning the changed tasks.

Employee Participation in Change

Management can also lessen resistance to change by increasing employee involvement in the change process. Henry Lucas lists some of the strengths of encouraging employee participation in change. First, participation increases employee knowledge about the innovation thus lessening fear. Second, participation can be ego enhancing, intrinsically satisfying, and challenging, thus making workers feel needed and appreciated. Finally, participation encourages employees to believe that they have some control over a system that will affect them (Lucas, 1974, pp. 49). This last point is particularly important since psychologists have shown that even small amounts of individual control over adverse stimuli will reduce a person's opposition to these stimuli (Gratchel & Proctor, 1976).

A recent article by Debra Shaw (1986) also supports the idea that participation can reduce resistance to change. In 1983 the Indiana State Library surveyed employees to determine their initial feelings about installing an automated catalog and circulation system. Management then attempted to involve as many staff as possible in planning for the automated system.

Participation was encouraged through a library automation planning committee and through a committee which concentrated on staff development for automation. Each committee was comprised of senior management and volunteers. Both committees shared information about their tasks with various library departments and invited suggestions from the departments for consideration. Several other techniques were also used to keep staff involved and informed, ranging from a regular news memo to programs which acquainted staff with automation terminology and with various automated systems. One year after the study began, staff attitudes were significantly more positive about the proposed new system.

Two cautions need to be offered about participative management. Token participation for employees is not enough. Participative management will only ease resistance to innovation when employees truly believe they can influence the change. In fact, Wilson Luquire (1976) found that attitudes relating to innovation (which in this case was the introduction of OCLC in academic libraries) were directly related to the real level of participative management in the libraries (p. 48). Real level refers to the level to which employees were actually allowed to influence decisions rather than the level to which managers said employees were allowed to influence decisions.

A second caution is also in order. Not all staff members are interested in participatory management. The Indiana State Library appropriately encouraged involvement by volunteers. This approach may be the wisest if a number of people are not interested in participating in the decision-making process.

Fear of Change Due to Social Consequence

One other major type of employee fear is caused when the potential social consequences of the change are not anticipated and allowed for. Perhaps this is best illustrated when looking at the effects of hiring a new director in a fairly small public library. Let's say that the old director had been at the library for twenty years and is retiring. The ten employees have been trained by, and have worked well with, the old director. In this situation each of the employees is not only nervous about whether the new director will be satisfied with their individual performance, but also they are nervous about how the new director will relate to them both as a person and as an employee. In other words, they are nervous that the change might have unanticipated (and negative) social consequences.

In fact, the levels of employee stress just after the hiring of a new director tend to be very high. One main way the new director can reduce stress levels is to be very careful during his first few months on the job to treat employees as if he likes each and every one of them and as if he recognizes the unique contributions that each is offering the library.

Resistance because of Failure to Prove Change is Needed

Resistance to change also occurs when managers fail to convince employees that the change is needed. In one public library in Ohio, library staff resisted efforts to reintegrate the genre fiction collection into the general fiction collection. Management wanted to do this because they felt one interfiled system would make it easier for the technical services staff to inventory the collection since they wouldn't have to look in three or four possible places for a particular book. However, the staff noted that patrons liked having mysteries and other genre areas separated out from the regular collection and that inventories were conducted only once every ten years. In this case, the employees perceived that the proposed change was not a valid one. Ultimately management agreed to let the collection remain separate by genre.

Change should only be implemented when a performance gap exists—that is, when people become highly dissatisfied with some aspect of a task or process. Remember the study of high school students performing the simple manual tasks. The experienced group was finally persuaded to change by an astute manager who made them consider the performance gap, showing them that automation would enable them to complete the work in a fraction of the time (Sagie et al., 1985, p. 160).

The implication here is that management must do a good job identifying and publicizing areas where true performance gaps exist if they expect employees to feel that they have valid reasons for changing. It also implies that if a performance gap does not really exist, management should reconsider the change.

Failure to Commit Sufficient Resources to the Change

Increased resistance to change can also result when managers do not follow through by committing sufficient resources to the change. In one public library, initial employee reactions to the introduction of an automated circulation system and online catalog were generally positive. However, upper management failed to hire an expert to introduce automation, skimped on system specifications, purchased an inferior automated system, and overworked existing personnel to get the system started. Several years later, the automated circulation system was down as much as it was up, required an average twenty second response time when it was up, and had increased both employee and patron dissatisfaction with the library. In addition, machine-readable information on the library's collection had to be input twice since system failures caused much of the data to be erroneously erased from the computer's memory banks. The staff who were initially supportive of the system developed higher and higher levels of frustration and eventually turned against the system. This is clearly a case where administrators failed to commit sufficient resources to planning and implementing a large change and directly increased employee resistance.

Actually, Fine (1986, p. 92) suggests that it is not uncommon for resources (particularly personnel resources) to be overextended or withdrawn just when staff is experiencing the greatest stress of change. Moreover, she adds that administrators often skimp on really necessary items, e.g., complete training by experts may be viewed as an extravagance rather than as a necessary expenditure associated with change. Thus, it is important for managers to be particularly sensitive to this issue, and to critically examine if they have supported the innovation by providing all necessary resources—be it money, time, increased attention to detail by management, added personnel, or whatever.

Resistance Due to Failure to Tie Library Values to the Change

Another reason that employees resist change is that management often forgets to emphasize the positive aspects of the change on professional and library values—e.g., improved service to patrons. Unfortunately, some managers fail both to keep employees informed of the library's values (which should be revealed through the library's statements of its mission and goals), and then to tie the positive effects of the change to these values. Remember George, the worker who resisted efforts to hire a consultant to evaluate the collection. He might have responded more appropriately if management had tied the positive effects of the change to a goal which he supported—i.e., matching collections to patron needs. In other words, if managers insist on hiring a collection evaluation consultant, they need to explain that they are doing this to make sure that collection development efforts are really meeting user needs.

Resistance Due to Failure to Create a Climate Conducive to Change

General resistance to change may also result when managers fail to create a positive climate where change can flourish. The best illustration of this might be a library where management allows employees little participation and in fact does not encourage new ideas in any way. Research has shown that employees resist change less when they are given opportunities to participate in continuing education activities, in professional organization activities, and in professional training—e.g., the MLS degree (Maag, 1975). Each of these activities encourages employees to think and to act for themselves. The activities both expose workers to new ideas and give them confidence in their abilities to respond to new situations. Therefore, workers become more receptive to changes which are proposed and shown to be valid. This implies that managers need to both encourage and reward employee efforts to learn and grow as this will reinforce receptivity to change.

Summary

Fine (1986) originally implied that inept management strategies can cause resistance to change to accelerate. Both logic and research support this statement and show us the need for corrective management action. Corrective action can include providing adequate information about change and being generally sensitive to employee fears about change. Other positive steps include convincing employees that a real reason exists for the change and committing sufficient resources to the change to ease the transition process and alleviate employee frustration. Managers should also tie the change to improved patron service and should constantly work to create a climate where employees are encouraged to explore new ideas and try them out.

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