



Revisiting resistance to change and how to manage it: What has been learned and what organizations need to do



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Abstract Resistance to change can be a significant factor in the success or failure of changes. As such, researchers have spent more than a half century studying the causes of resistance and how to manage it. Much can be learned from resistance literature that applies to today's unparalleled, nonstop change in which an organization's ability to manage resistance to change can not only impact the change's success or failure but also determine whether an organization will survive or thrive. This article explores important lessons revealed via resistance literature, and more importantly, how such knowledge applies to managing change in the modern world. The article emphasizes the urgent need for organizations to become skilled at effectively managing change and resistance to change and offers recommendations on how they can do so.

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1. The importance of understanding resistance to change

Resistance to change has a long history primarily rooted in the field of organization development and change. How resistance is viewed, managed, and studied regarding organizational change is a highly relevant topic.

Dynamic, unpredictable, and unrelenting change is normal and often accompanied by resistance or a lack of change. Resistance can be reasonable or unreasonable and can be expressed visibly or silently. Regardless of its form, however, resistance is one of the main reasons change efforts fail (Erwin & Garman, 2010). Effectively managing resistance can have significant payoffs for organizations, but lacking skills can have significant costs (Burnes, 2015).

Change and its resistance have been ever-present throughout history. However, the

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accelerated rate, unpredictability, and quantity of change that organizations and individuals must deal with in such an interconnected, high-tech, and complex world—as well as the potential consequences of organizational, social, cultural, economic, and political changes—underscores change and resistance to change in the modern era. In understanding the need for knowledge and skills to manage change and resistance, consider the multitude of changes organizations deal with including changes in leadership, structure, strategy, culture, technology, practices, attracting and retaining talent, cyber security, crisis management, government regulations, responding to what people want out of work, and many other factors that must be effectively managed for organizations to compete.

In addition to the changes mentioned—many of which likely involved managing resistance—organizations must also prepare to adapt and deal with unpredictable changes such as the COVID-19 pandemic that altered the world and impacted lives and organizations, regardless of size, in such a short period. The pandemic affected almost all aspects of how organizations are run, resulting in a multitude of changes (e.g., determining the balance of remote to in-person work amid its support or condemnation; Colvin, 2021). As such, leaders and organizations must learn as much as possible about managing change and resistance to it.

2. Lessons learned about resistance to change

While resistance to change is not a novel concept, the first formal mention of the term appeared in an article written by Kurt Lewin (1947) under a section titled “Constancy and Resistance to Change.” The context differed from the term’s actual usage, but it provided a name for resistance to change and resulted in many articles and books devoted to its understanding.

Coch and French (1948) conducted the first major study of resistance to change, as well as many others at the Harwood Manufacturing Corporation under the guidance of Lewin. Harwood Manufacturing was a pajama factory that employed over 500 production workers and experienced considerable resistance due to numerous changes workers were required to make regarding what they did and how they did it. Coch and French studied different approaches to managing changes with various groups and found that the degree of

participation—rather than personal factors—was the biggest influence in reducing resistance to change. As discussed throughout the rest of Section 2, the Coch and French study provided a foundation for many of the future conclusions regarding change resistance. It is worth noting that individuals affected by change are called *recipients*, and those that initiate and lead change (e.g., leaders, professionals, and others who champion modification) are called *change agents*.

2.1. How you view resistance determines how you manage it

Assumptions regarding resistance to change are important in determining how resistance is managed and can have a significant influence on the success or failure of change efforts. Consider the following major assumptions about resistance and its implications.

2.1.1. Resistance is disadvantageous and creates obstacles that managers must overcome

Resistance is predominantly viewed under this assumption (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Management textbooks often include a heading that reads “Why Employees Resist Change” or “How to Overcome Resistance” as well as reasons employees resist change and what managers can do to overcome such resistance. This view has three underlying assumptions: managers know what must be changed, employees resist for various reasons, and managers must find ways to overcome negative attitudes, which can be helpful or coercive. Resistant employees are considered either a nuisance or bad apples.

2.1.2. People naturally resist change, so resistance is to be expected

This view presumes that employees are the problem and must be dealt with, as people naturally resist change (Craine, 2007; Ford et al., 2008; Greiner, 1992; Peiperl, 2005). Numerous studies on resistance disagree with this assumption and demonstrate that while there may be some natural reasons employees resist, others embrace and like change (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). In a *Harvard Business Review* highlights excerpt, Lawrence (1969, p. 6) said: “Let me reemphasize the point that resistance to change is by itself neither good nor bad. Resistance may be soundly based or not. It is always, however, an important signal calling for further inquiry by management.”

2.1.3. Resistance can come from employees or managers and can help manage change

This thinking represents a breakthrough regarding resistance to change, suggesting that resistance can come from managers as well as employees, resisters may offer valuable information, and resistance must be managed as part of the change process (Anderson, 2020; Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Ford et al., 2008). Interestingly, the foundation for such beliefs resides in the Coch and French study. However, it only recently gained critical attention. This assumption significantly changes our view of resistance and how we manage it and suggests creating a safe environment to consider and discuss resistance. In some cases, resisters may be heroes rather than villains, preventing negative changes and fine-tuning positive ones. A book titled *Embracing Resistance to Change* (Maddox, 2021) explores a positive approach to the way resisters are perceived and how to manage resistance.

2.2. How to recognize resistance

Signs of resistance are not always easy to detect because they may not be visibly expressed. However, resistance research provides cues to be aware of, as unaddressed resistance can undermine or lead to misguided changes. Some of the cues noted by researchers are emotions (e.g., fear, anger, anxiety, and excessive complaining) and behaviors (e.g., disengagement and lack of involvement, decreased performance or morale, overly aggressive or passive behavior, prevention or hindrance of change, and increased turnover; Block, 2011; Ford & Ford, 2010; O'Toole, 1995).

These cues still require managers to determine whether to surface and explore the reasons for resistance or when to confront disruptive resistance. I recall one consulting example in which an executive vice president visibly and vocally did everything he could to undermine the changes being made even though I met with him many times to hear and reason through his objections. The other vice presidents told me they were fed up with his resistance and were losing confidence in the CEO since the resistance caused such negative effects. I discussed the matter with the CEO, who then had a meeting with the executive VP, clarifying that he needed to be part of and stop undermining the change process.

2.3. Why people resist change

To put resistance into perspective, when changes are made, one-third of the people involved will

support the change, one-third will be skeptical and want more information about the change, and one-third will resist the change (Waldman & O'Reilly, 2022). There are multiple reasons for resistance to change, and understanding these reasons can combat such resistance and help inform leaders on how to manage it. Resistance literature presents at least four major categories for why people resist change, as discussed throughout Section 2.3.

2.3.1. Personal reasons

Numerous studies have explored the personal reasons people resist change (e.g., Burnes, 2015; Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008; Oreg, 2003, 2018; Zander, 1950). A person's response will be a combination of how they respond to change generally and how they respond to a specific change. For example, some thrive on change while others dislike it and prefer maintaining the status quo. Change will likely be resisted if self-interest is threatened or if it has adverse effects. Change may also be resisted because of uncertainty about what the change will mean, conflicting information (or lack thereof), or insufficient reasons for change. Resistance can be expected when change is perceived as coercive and designed with another's motives or agendas. From personal consulting experience, resistance may also occur if employees believe the change does not make sense, there are better alternatives, the cure appears worse than the disease, the change is copious, or the change represents a difference in personal or organizational values, principles, and goals.

2.3.2. Organizational reasons

It makes sense that a productive organization with skilled, trusted, and respected leaders—who have a genuine concern for employees and a commitment to a positive workplace—would have less resistance to change than an organization that predominantly focuses on the bottom line, has little regard for people, and is led by untrustworthy, ineffective leaders. As organization development grew in the 1960s and beyond, greater emphasis was placed on building people-oriented organizations and creating a culture that welcomes change (Burnes, 2015).

In the resistance literature, numerous scholars began to discover that an organization and the way it is run can have a significant influence on resistance to change (e.g., Beer et al., 1990; Coch & French, 1948; Kotter, 1995; Senge, 1990). To reduce resistance, increase support for change, and develop attractive organizations for employees, changes must be aligned with the values

and practices of employees (Burns & James, 1995). This helps organizations be people-oriented and responsive to workers' needs (Buckingham, 2022; Gherson & Gratton, 2022; Leinwand et al., 2022). In their article on managing resistance to change, Gilgeous and Chambers (1999) summed up the two main causes of change and its potential for resistance in organizations as internal (e.g., management philosophy, structure, culture, and the power and control system) and external (e.g., changes in technology, markets, customer expectations, competitor activities, quality and standards, government legislation, and the economy). Resistance literature shows the impact of an organization's management on resistance to and support for change.

2.3.3. How change agents cause resistance or build support

While much of the resistance literature focuses on recipients and how to manage their resistance, change agents can also have a significant influence on whether changes are resisted or supported (Armenakis et al., 1993, 1999; Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Endrejat et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2008; Klonek et al., 2014; Oreg & Sverdluk, 2011). Some change agents who lead or initiate change will be resisted because of their reputation, leadership style, or practices. These agents generally initiate changes with minimal communication, involvement, and concern for those who are impacted by or resist change—and may even initiate change with questionable motives that distort trust.

The change agent researchers focused primarily on change agent skills. Skilled change agents are straightforward and transparent regarding changes and do not oversell or mislead employees. They can be trusted to do what is right and keep their commitments. These agents also demonstrate support from management, effectively and honestly communicate reasons for change, and internalize feedback and resistance. They build good relationships with those impacted by changes and have a genuine interest in their concerns. Yet resistance literature also recognizes the need to provide training to (carefully chosen) change agents for managing change and resistance to it.

2.3.4. How change is managed

Poorly managed change is the most important cause of resistance to it (Bordia et al., 2011; Gilgeous & Chambers, 1999). In addition, well-managed change decreases resistance and increases support (Ford et al., 2008; Oreg et al., 2011). Most organizations lack skills in this area even though it is important for their future

success—as much as 70% of significant organizational changes fail to achieve the desired results or fail altogether (Burke & Nourmair, 2015; Kotter, 1990; Miller, 2002).

In working with organizations, I often ask people at different levels how skilled their organization is at managing change. Some typical responses to this question include:

- “Changes are often made at the top with little, if any, explanation as to why they are being made, with no involvement of those expected to implement the changes, and with no understanding that the change makes little sense to those impacted by the changes.”
- “It is clear that providing feedback on changes is risky, so we do what we are told even though it is a waste of time and resources.”
- “Changes almost always mean more work—more busy work, doing more with less—with no benefit to me or others.”
- “Management is either unaware of or does not care about the impact of their changes on employees.”
- “I am reluctant to get involved in changes because they have a low probability of success, and I am likely to be identified with how they are badly managed.”

When organizations frequently mismanage change, it creates an organizational attitude toward it that increases resistance (Bordia et al., 2011). From a more positive perspective, well-managed change can expect a high success rate (Golembiewski, 2019). The fifth theme will discuss skills elucidated by the resistance literature regarding managing resistance to change.

2.4. Potential consequences of resistance

The resistance literature has also illuminated the potential consequences of resistance (e.g., Cutchner, 2009; Erwin & Garman, 2010; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Ford et al., 2002; Lawrence, 1954; Rahaman et al., 2021). This perspective on resistance is important because it serves as a motivator to develop skills on how to manage it, as the costs of resistance can be significant.

The resistance literature discussed several consequences of resistance: the failure or underachievement of desired change objectives, wasted time and resources, reduced productivity, and

resistance delays that increase costs, slow change, undermine commitment, and slow momentum. Resistance can also result in a loss of confidence and trust in leaders to effectively manage the change process, internal conflict, and differences between leaders and followers. In addition, inappropriate measures for dealing with resistance can damage morale and increase absenteeism and turnover. Another potential cost of resistance is losing the ability to adapt and make swift necessary changes. However, the resistance literature expands upon more than just the costs and specifics of resistance to change. The findings highlight broader reasons for understanding the many costs of poorly managed change.

2.5. Skills for managing resistance and their insight applicable to managing change

As the resistance literature evolved and perspectives changed, it became clear that the term “managing resistance to change” is more appropriate than “overcoming resistance to change.” Contributions to managing resistance emerged in some of the earliest studies on resistance, which found that participation, involvement, and soliciting ideas from participants reduced resistance and resulted in a greater commitment to change (Chin & Benne, 1985; Coch & French, 1948; Zander, 1950). Communication was also key to managing resistance to change, which should include planning and providing managerial support for change, outlining the expected results, and monitoring how such changes will affect employees (Armenakis et al., 1999). Researchers encouraged supportive communication and listening to resistance (Vos & Rupert, 2018). In managing resistance, it is important to communicate the change vision, ensure reward systems align with the desired change, and train employees to adapt to changes (Waldman & O’Reilly, 2022).

In their *Harvard Business Review* article, Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) summarized numerous strategies for reducing resistance, such as education, participation, facilitation, negotiation, discussion, financial incentives, and political support. They also acknowledge negative approaches—such as manipulation and coercion—that are seldom mentioned in the resistance literature. These approaches can lead to future problems if employees feel manipulated and can alienate the initiators from the receivers. While negative approaches—such as force, deception, and even violence—are used to accomplish change, they will likely increase passive and aggressive resistance.

What should be clear about the many contributions the resistance literature has made to knowledge about managing resistance to change is that much of what we know about managing change has come from these contributions. It should also be clear that training in effectively managing change could be a high-payoff investment that every organization needs to consider.

3. Why people resist change and how to manage it

After revisiting the various perspectives on resistance to and how to manage change and exploring the lessons that can be learned, the need for a multifaceted perspective emerges (Burnes, 2015; Garcia-Cabrera & Hernandez, 2014; Oreg, 2006). Tables 1 and 2 simplify and present the information in an understandable and applicable way. Table 1 summarizes the major reasons why people resist change, and Table 2 summarizes alternatives for managing resistance to change.

4. How organizations can develop the skills necessary for managing change and resistance to it

Extant resistance literature details managing change and resistance to it, yet there is a lack of understanding regarding the application of such knowledge. Therefore, I offer four recommendations that elevate present knowledge to help organizations become skilled in managing both change and resistance to it. Because skills for managing these issues are so closely linked, and what has been learned about managing resistance applies to managing all changes, the term managing change applies to all changes—including resistance to change.

4.1. Commit to being a change champion

Understanding the urgency for organizations to develop skills for managing change and resistance to it, I encourage others to become change champions in their organizations. As a champion of change, they can practice their acquired knowledge regarding resistance to and management of change—as a change agent or participant—and can become advocates for training in change management and developing organizational skills for managing change. When they have opportunities to do (e.g., being involved in the decision-making process), they can encourage strong change management and promote change-related

Table 1. Lessons learned: Why people resist change

<i>Personal reasons</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfort with the status quo, low tolerance for change, typical response to change • Lack of information and compelling reasons for change, uncertainty about the impact of changes • Adversely affected by the change, threat to self-interest or status • Change does not make sense, there are better alternatives, or the change is not necessary • Change is contrary to personal values and principles or stated organizational values and principles • Change is perceived as coercive, forced, or made with questionable motives
<i>Organizational reasons</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bottom-line-oriented organization that shows little concern for employees or their well-being • Leaders are not trusted nor perceived as skilled leaders • Unpleasant organizational cultures that do not attract and retain talented workers • Top-down, controlling structures and practices that demotivate employees • Out of touch with changing times, must adapt to be competitive
<i>The role of change agents in causing resistance</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistance occurs because of a change agent's reputation, leadership style, or practices • Lack of communication regarding the purpose and impact of changes • Oversell or mislead people regarding changes • Minimal communication, involvement, and opportunities for feedback and dialogue during the change process • Lack of transparency and questionable practices, motives, and agendas that undermine trust • Minimal effort to build rapport with, listen to, and engage those impacted by change
<i>How change is managed</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change agents are often lacking in training and skills to manage change • Because of the lack of skills in managing change, there is a high failure rate at successfully implementing changes • An organizational attitude is created regarding how change is managed, as well as the failure and negative impact of changes, which increases resistance to change

books, articles, and other materials for learning about managing change.

4.2. Develop transformational leaders who can lead and manage organizations amid change

The term transformational leadership was originally developed by James MacGregor Burns in 1978.¹ The concept was further developed by others, and research on transformational leadership continues today. Prior research aimed to develop leaders capable of bringing about significant positive changes in individuals, groups, and organizations by providing vision, inspiration, engagement, and motivation, as well as communicating compelling goals and values. Warrick (2011) pointed out that while transformational leadership concepts are excellent for leadership skills used to transform organizations, they should also include organizational development skills (e.g., managing change and transforming organizations), as leaders with these skills are necessary. Organizations must commit to developing leaders

with transformational leadership skills such as leading, managing change, and transforming organizations. These developments can significantly reduce resistance to change and increase support for necessary changes.

4.3. Develop a safe culture for open dialogue

The resistance literature clarified the importance of having a safe culture for open dialogue, including for those resisting change. In a fast-moving, rapidly changing, and highly competitive environment, having a culture that encourages open and safe dialogue becomes a critical factor in the success of an organization and is particularly important in making changes. It helps change initiators consider valuable insights, develop a realistic view of changes, and expose unnecessary changes that are not likely to succeed. There are numerous ways leaders can create a safe culture for open dialogue, as discussed in Section 4.3.

4.3.1. Set an example

Valuing open and straightforward communication must become a clear value or cultural norm that leaders also practice. Leaders must avoid engaging

¹ Burns, J.M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.

Table 2. Lessons learned about managing resistance and change**Clearly communicate compelling reasons for change and its impact**

- Clarify the reasons for change, what the change consists of, and how the change will affect employees.

View resistance as part of the change process

- Resistance is neither good nor bad and can provide valuable information that can help consider, plan, and implement changes. Continued, disruptive resistance should be confronted as it can derail necessary changes.

Consider the qualifications of change agents (leaders, professionals, or others who initiate change)

- The qualifications, reputations, and skills of change agents can significantly affect resistance or support for changes and their success or failure.

Involve and engage the appropriate people in the change process

- Involve, engage, and listen to those who can best contribute to the planning and implementation of changes. People will likely own what they participate in and help create.

Provide education and training to prepare people for change and help them make necessary changes

- Educate people on the change, provide training to help people adapt to changes, and train change agents on how to effectively manage changes.

Address concerns and create opportunities for safe, open, and candid two-way communication

- Address concerns and fears and create opportunities for open, two-way communication so all aspects of a change can be considered.

Build trust, be transparent, and communicate throughout the change process

- Act in ways that build—rather than undermine—trust, be transparent and straightforward, keep people informed, and invite feedback throughout the change process.

Clearly demonstrate the support and trustworthiness of top-level leaders

- When top-level leaders demonstrate their support for a change and participate in the change process, changes have a higher probability of acceptance and success.

Align rewards and incentives with the desired change

- It is important to make the incentive for change greater than the incentive to stay the same. Changes often mean more work, potentially making things worse for employees. Efforts must be made to provide incentives for making successful changes.

Avoid coercion, threats, and hidden agendas in making changes

- Accomplishing change using manipulative, forceful, and deceptive tactics builds distrust and passive or aggressive resistance, causing undesirable consequences.

in disingenuous openness in which they initiate an open dialogue yet ignore what was said and do things their way—regardless of employee input. Leaders must also handle challenges, setbacks, and failures in positive and helpful ways. For example, I engaged with one CEO of a Fortune 500 company who was very critical of the assessment results of a survey conducted by a change team. His reaction discouraged involvement with major changes for many years following such a response.

4.3.2. Create opportunities for open dialogue

Even leaders who engage in welcome, open dialogue must create opportunities for openness and feedback with the knowledge that their position can influence what is relayed to them. These opportunities can include asking employees specific questions that invite openness, organizing meetings—with or without a leader's presence—to brainstorm, consider ideas, and provide feedback, using surveys to gather valuable information, and forming teams to plan and implement changes that

incorporate all or some of those impacted by change. Creating opportunities for open dialogue is especially valuable during the change process to monitor what is going well, what may need further alteration, and where resistance may take place. When feedback is neither sought nor encouraged, changes can be derailed or require improvements—which can happen without leaders' knowledge.

4.3.3. Keep people informed

Keeping people informed conveys a culture of openness. Since people in organizations tend to be overloaded with information, it takes planning and good judgment to determine what, how, and how much information is shared to adequately communicate changes and clarify that openness is welcome.

4.3.4. Develop organizational expertise in managing change

This article—and an abundance of articles, books, and studies on how organizations can

succeed—clarifies that developing expertise to manage change should be an organizational priority. Unfortunately, few organizations have a purposeful way of accomplishing this goal. Section 4.4. outlines three ways for organizations to develop skills in managing change and resistance to it.

4.4. Clear methods for managing change

To further illustrate the ultimate purpose of this article in helping organizations manage resistance to change, I provide three recommendations:

1. *Assign responsibility for developing and providing expertise in managing change.* A person, department, team, or external professional must be tasked with developing expertise and providing resources for effectively managing change. For example, responsibilities may include attending and providing training to manage change, collecting resources (e.g., books, articles, videos, and questionnaires), and providing counsel, facilitation, or other necessary help to manage change.
2. *Develop guidelines for those at all organizational levels to manage change.* Leaders and others involved in the change process can use a brief, one-page list of guidelines to consider, plan, and implement changes. This is one of the quickest and most effective ways to educate and help change champions develop skills in managing change. The guidelines must be developed by a team that includes the CEO—or at least one top-level leader—so the guidelines are used in a top-down approach. A list of guidelines is provided in [Table 2](#) exemplifying what has been learned about managing resistance to change. Consulting books and articles on managing change could stimulate additional helpful ideas.² Leaders should disseminate a first draft for feedback before creating a final list to familiarize others with the importance of effectively managing change.
3. *Organize change learning sessions.* While it is a common practice for military and sports teams to debrief and learn via various activities, it is uncommon to do so in most organizations. As such, organizations would benefit from holding one or more short sessions per year in which examples of change efforts are shared

(e.g., what did or did not work and what lessons were learned). These sessions can provide opportunities for sharing ideas about managing change and continuously improving skills in managing change. In addition, they can instill the importance of effectively managing change in the organizational culture. Finally, change learning sessions can also be used to address and share ideas regarding specific issues. For example, I have had clients that have addressed the problems of work overload and change fatigue. I recently worked with an organization to explore ways to minimize or remove unnecessary work; minimize bureaucracy, reports, and meetings; more effectively propose changes; and plan enjoyable activities to relieve stress and build camaraderie.

5. Next steps for applying the resistance literature, organizational success

Given the rate and abundance of change that organizations must deal with, coupled with the many consequences mismanaged change can impose on all parties involved, all organizations should urgently develop skills to effectively manage change and resistance to it. Revisiting the resistance literature provides valuable insights for managing resistance to change. More importantly, the resistance literature has advanced our understanding of effectively managing change. The intent of this article was not only to learn from the past but also to provide insight for organizations to develop change skills that will aid future success.

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² See, for example, [Hodges \(2021\)](#).

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