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# Overcome The 5 Main Reasons People Resist Change

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6-7 minutes



Uncover potential resistance prior to implementing change. Photo: Microsoft Free Clip Art

A career coaching client, newly promoted into a management position, called me to discuss a situation at work. *“We had to reduce expenses within the company so I made some changes in the organizational structure of the department by consolidating a few positions, putting several projects on hold, cancelling one project, and letting a few people go,”* she explained. *“I didn’t think it would be any big deal, but some employees in the department are acting like I’m as ruthless as Attila the Hun. Several are avoiding me and a few have become downright hostile in their attitude towards me. I don’t understand why they’re acting this way.”*

Leadership is about leading, but it’s also about implementing change, as my client found out. While many people like to joke that the only constant in business is change, change has an interesting way of affecting people that can often result in resistance. This

resistance can range from fairly subtle, such as avoidance or passive aggressive behavior, all the way to outright defiance, hostility, and sabotage. The best way to avoid resistance to change? Seek to uncover potential resistance *prior* to implementing change.

What my client didn't realize is that she wasn't just a manager, she was also an implementer of change within the department.

According to [Rosabeth Moss Kanter](#), Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, "The best tool for leaders of change is to understand the predictable, universal sources of resistance in each situation and then strategize around them."

Prior to making changes that will affect others, it's important for managers to carefully think through: 1) what the specific changes include, 2) who the changes will impact, 3) how it will impact them, and 4) how they might react (understanding reasons why people might resist the changes). Knowing this information makes it easier to create a plan of action for a smooth implementation of the changes.

Let's look at my client's situation using this process:

- **What the specific changes include:** In this case, the changes involved re-structuring the department, consolidating numerous positions, laying off several employees, cancelling one project, and putting several other projects on hold. No small changes, indeed!
- **Who the changes will impact:** Mainly all of the department employees, but the changes could also impact other stakeholder groups, such as if any of the projects cancelled or put on hold include cross-functional team members from other departments.

- **How the changes will impact them:** The biggest impact is to the employees being laid off, as there will be both emotional and financial impact. Employees whose jobs will change could also have emotional and financial implications, although to a lesser extent. Employees' job tasks will change for those whose projects were put on hold or cancelled. Finally, there will be an emotional impact to everyone in the department, whether or not they are directly affected by the changes.

After analyzing this information, the next step is to look at what I've found are the 5 main reasons why people resist change:

- **Fear of the unknown/surprise:** This type of resistance occurs mainly when change is implemented without warning the affected stakeholders before the change occurs. When change (especially what is perceived as negative change) is pushed onto people without giving them adequate warning and without helping them through the process of understanding what the change will include and how their jobs/work will be affected, it can cause people to push back against the change due to their fear of the unknown.
- **Mistrust:** If the individuals in a department highly respect their manager because the manager has built up trust over a period of time, the team will be more accepting of any changes. If the manager is new and has not yet earned the trust of their employees (like my client), then mistrust can manifest itself into resistance to change.
- **Loss of job security/control:** This type of resistance often occurs when companies announce they will be restructuring or downsizing. This causes fear among employees that they will lose their jobs or be moved into other positions without their input.

- **Bad timing:** As the old saying goes, “Timing is everything”. Heaping too much change on employees over a short period of time can cause resistance. If change is not implemented at the right time or with the right level of tact or empathy, it usually won’t work.
- **An individual’s predisposition toward change:** Differences exist in people’s overall tolerance for change. Some people enjoy change because it provides them with an opportunity to learn new things and grow personally and professionally. Others abhor change because they prefer a set routine – these are usually the people who become suspicious of change and are more likely to resist.

**Bottom Line:** Take the time to understand 1) what the specific changes include, 2) who the changes will impact, 3) how it will impact them, and 4) why they might resist the changes.

Being aware of the reasons people resist change will help you implement change with fewer issues. Eliminate fear of the unknown by letting affected groups know there will be changes coming. Avoid mistrust and the feeling of loss of control by getting others involved in the changes before they occur and asking them to offer input and feedback. Prevent bad timing by providing a clear vision and reason for the changes along with a timetable or schedule of what to expect and when to expect it.

Implementing change is never painless, but it can be a lot less painful for everyone when it is done with empathy and compassion after thorough analysis, planning, and strategizing.

~ [Lisa Quast](#)

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