Amy Seidl
CCT692 Processes of Research and Engagement
Assignment H: Draft of Final Report, Revision 1
12/13/2016

Title: In What Ways Can Understanding Resistance to Change Help us to Adapt, or even

Embrace, Change?

"The only constant in life is change." - Heraclitus

I.   The Change Agent Resisting Change

Change is one of the most consistent experiences that we have in life and yet is

something that so many of us struggle with. I personally have been subjected to involuntary

organizational change many times, from being laid-off to having my new employer acquired by a

larger firm. I have experienced the stress and anxiety of wondering what will happen, for

months at a time, as the organization carried on with its plans and communicated with us very

poorly, if at all.

I was later invited to become a member of the new organization's process improvement

team, my first time as a 'change agent.' It was now my job to act as an internal consultant and

work with various departments to help them identify problems in their workflow and design

solutions to solve those problems. As someone who has resisted organizational change myself

(and sometimes still does), I was now in a position where I was meant to be its champion. I now

had to convince others of the value of change and help guide them through the stress and anxiety

that accompanies it.

Change can be uncomfortable and frightening at times, even when it is meant to be

positive change. Despite being a champion of change, and trying to persuade others to support

organizational change, I still often resisted it myself. I've experienced resistance when trying to

implement my own personal change. Despite recognizing that I wanted and needed the change, and that I was solely responsible for implementing it, I often still found myself procrastinating, worrying, and making excuses of why I couldn't do it yet.

I found myself becoming extremely burnt out in my career, constantly feeling and fighting the resistance, from others and from myself. I chose to take a break from my role as a change agent for others to focus on understanding and making change for myself.

It may help to understand the impact of resisting change by considering an example. Imagine a typical day at work, arriving at your desk and thinking about the work ahead of you, today and in the weeks or months ahead. Your work is challenging, and sometimes frustrating, but you had a good sense of what needs to be done and how you will approach it. Even the tasks that you dread have a certain level of comfort to them because you know they will be challenging but you've learned how to work through those challenges.

But today your manager holds a team meeting and informs you that someone will be temporarily joining your team to help your group evaluate your processes to find ways to make things run more smoothly. This is surprising because you feel that, although every team has issues, your team generally has a good reputation for getting the work done accurately and on schedule. You wonder what prompted the manager to do this. Is she unhappy with the team's work? Is something else going on within the company? What will this mean going forward? You are busy enough without this extra work dealing with a consultant. How will you fit this in? What changes are going to be implemented?

While these are reasonable questions, there are also a number of ways that we can respond to the change at this point. Many, and I've done this myself, might respond by resisting the changes. This might manifest as procrastinating when asked to provide information or pointing out the flaws in each newly proposed idea. You might subconsciously view this consultant as an outsider who just doesn't understand and your role is to protect your team from his or her potentially harmful influence.

Another way to respond would be to remain more open-minded. Choose to collaborate with this change agent so that you can combine forces to come up with new and innovative ideas that address your concerns while also solving some of the problems you experience. Act in a way that encourages partnership among the team, the change agent, and management to highlight the good work done by the team and find ways to improve even further. In this way, rather than being a detractor and an obstacle, you've ensured that your voice and concerns have been heard in a positive and productive way.

II.   Types of Organizational Change

When speaking about organizational change, there are two main types that we need to deal with. The first is big, bold, transformational change. This is the type of change that seems to come out of nowhere and is meant to revolutionize the business. The other type of change is evolutionary change. This type of change is more natural and organic. It seems to be the next logical step and is often expected or feels as if it is long overdue. Research has shown that transformational change typically creates greater resistance than evolutionary change (Pardo del Val & Martínez Fuentes, 2003). In addition, the type of organizational change may strongly influence an employee's intentions. For example, transformational change has been shown to

increase job turnover as employee's consider their role in the organization and whether they feel

they still have a place in the new organization (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006).

When looking at change, we must also consider the multiple perspectives involved. In

organizational change, there are several: the executives or management team, the change agents,

and the employees. Each of these participants will have a different view of the benefits and risks

of organizational change, as well as their role in it and the organization. Within this paper, the

focus will be on the perspective of the employee, though I will endeavor to include perspectives

on the relationships between the employee and the other participants.

One important aspect when considering the perspective of the employee involved in

organizational change is how the change will impact an employee's sense of identity, both

personally and as part of the larger organization. Some employees self-identify more as an

individual and would more strongly consider how organizational change impacts their specific

role and well-being. Other employees self-identify as part of the collective and would evaluate

organizational change as it will impact the organization or their team as a whole (Wisse &

Sleebos, 2016).

III.   Resistance to Change

To properly understand resistance to change, it is important to first discuss how we might

define it. Pardo and Fuentes (2003) discuss resistance as behavior that slows down or inhibits

change, or as "conduct that that tries to keep the status quo." It is also important to understand

that resistance on its own is not necessarily a bad thing. Resistance to change may offer the

chance to evaluate a change to fully understand the impact. It may also offer an indication to

change agents that there is something else to be understood about the process in general, that the recommended change does not fully address the root cause of the problem (Pardo del Val & Martínez Fuentes, 2003). But it will be important to understand and evaluate the resistance to understand these nuances and take appropriate action.

There are many sources of resistance in the scope of organizational change. One of the first I'll discuss includes the perception of the need for change. Employees may have a different view of whether change is needed or different values related to the direction the company is moving towards resulting from the change. Another source of resistance may arise from a perceived threat to an employee's self-identity, either as an individual or as part of the collective of their organization, department, or some other career-related category. A third source of resistance is related to motivation for change. Some employees may not be opposed to the change itself but have had a poor experience with prior change efforts or are concerned about the potential costs of change, monetary or otherwise (Pardo del Val & Martínez Fuentes, 2003).

As discussed, resistance is not always a bad thing in and of itself as it can be an indication that more analysis needs to be done prior to implementing the change. However, resistance can also have serious impacts if not addressed appropriately. An employee who resists change may delay when responding to requests for information, or be unable to find the time to work on certain aspects of the project. These actions of resistance, while seeming benign, if unaddressed, may create financial costs as projects are delayed or obstructed during implementation. These could impact the employee in the long-term as budget changes may negatively impact salary increases and any performance-based bonuses. Some organizations that fail to change may close completely, leaving employees unemployed. As another concern,

ongoing resistance to change may cause degraded relationships between employers and

employees, or employees and their peers. An employee who consistently resists organizational

change may be seen as creating obstacles or not being a team-player. Over time, these

employees may find that their career-mobility stagnates or they are released from their position.

(Cite source)

Lastly, though perhaps most importantly, there could be long-term health consequences

for employees who are not able to cope with the stress created by organizational change.

Research has shown that organizational change can impact physical health in the form of

increased stress and anxiety, higher blood pressure, insomnia, etc. (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016).

IV.   Making Our Way Forward

So how do we find ways to address resistance to change moving forward? As mentioned

above, there are at least two perspectives to consider and so two paths we could focus on going

forward. One approach would be to put the ownership on the organization and identify steps that

management or the change agent could take to encourage employees to participate in rather than

resist this change. Alternatively, another approach would be to focus on the employee and ways

that they can better empower themselves to handle the change more easily. Ideally, the problem

could be approached from both sides, meeting in the middle, for the best results. However, for

the purposes of this paper, I choose to focus on the role of the employee and how we, as

individuals, can take ownership of our experience and adapt to changing circumstances around

us.

A question that arises in this research is to understand "How do we know when we are resisting?" Is it always obvious or can it be hidden, even from ourselves? Perhaps one way to begin this process of ownership and empowerment is with a period of self-reflection. Organizational Psychologist Liane Davey suggests a series of questions we can ask ourselves to understand if (and to what degree) we are resisting change. Examples include:

- I spend more time thinking about why the change is a bad idea than a good one

- I question why the change is necessary, even after the rationale has been explained

- I use my influence to try to get decisions reversed after they have been made (Davey, n.d.)

Our responses to the above statements can provide some insight into whether (and how much) we are resisting the change. Once we've made our level of resistance more explicit, we can begin to take steps to address it.

Identifying that resistance exists is critical but is only the first step. Resistance to change has been shown to cause stress which can have negative physical and psychological impact on individuals. However, research also shows that not all people feel the same amount of stress or react in the same way to the same change (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). In this case, an individual approach to managing this stress will be helpful, as each person will need to evaluate and act according to their own needs. Meditation and mindfulness programs have been shown to be effective in reducing stress and anxiety (Peterson & Pbert, 1992). These may offer a benefit to employees undergoing organizational change, to help manage the physiological and

psychological symptoms of stress due to change. Reducing these symptoms of stress and anxiety may provide a more receptive environment for evaluating our self-identity, our role in the organization and the true impact of the organizational change. (Expand further)

Now that we've had the opportunity to identify our own level of resistance and incorporate stress reduction techniques, the next step may be to find ways to engage more positively with the change. Additional research supports the idea that employees who feel more psychologically empowered are more likely to behave in a supportive way regarding organizational change (Lamm & Gordon, 2010). These feelings of empowerment may help employees find ways to participate and engage in the organizational change and ultimately be more satisfied with the results of the change.

It may be helpful at this point to consider further why we are resisting this change. We may feel worried about the potential impact that this change will have. And so let's consider further some of the reasons why we worry. Mathews (1990) has suggested that worry is a function of the cognitive system helping us to anticipate danger. When we worry, we are thinking of possible negative events, how those may impact us, and how we can avoid them. In the circumstance of organizational change, we may not be able to avoid them and so it may be to our benefit to shift to a problem-solving process and figure out potential solutions.

Self-reflection may be an avenue to pursue as this will provide an opportunity to evaluate our current situation, consider the impact we believe the change will have, and explore various outcomes and potential alternatives. By reflecting on a number of possible outcomes and "what if" scenarios, we have the time to safely explore our potential responses. If we explore the

worst-case scenario, we can reflect and evaluate on what else we might do. For example, if the worst-case is that we lose our jobs, self-reflection provides us the opportunity to evaluate this from several points:

- What is my current level of satisfaction in the job prior to the change?

- What else might I like to do instead?

- What other skills do I have, or could I develop, that might position me to better succeed during this change?

This time of self-reflection may shift help us to shift our perspective enough to realize that the change may not be as bad as we first thought. Perhaps we aren't as happy in the current situation as we might have thought. Or perhaps the idea of making a career change is actually rather exciting and this change is helping to provide some motivation to move forward. As discussed earlier, one source of resistance to change is a perceived threat to our self-identity, how we see ourselves as individuals and as part of the larger organization. We may fear a loss of power or prestige within the organization, or we may believe that the changes will be going against our own values of how the business should operate. Practicing self-reflection may help us to identify the feelings that this change has triggered in us and help us to make explicit what we expect may happen. Using a journal to describe what may happen to ourselves, our team, or the organization may help us to better understand our concerns and identify if they are valid or not. This may also help us to formulate the questions that we need to ask management or the change agent to ensure that we understand the scope of the change.

These self-reflection techniques may also help us to identify potential paths we may follow if the change ultimately does not suit us. Evaluating our options and deciding on one or more courses of actions may help to instill self-confidence and to know that we are capable of handling the outcome of the change, whatever that may be.

V.   Conclusion

Ultimately, how we respond and react to change remains a very personal, and often challenging, experience. In a perfect world, organizations will establish change programs that take into account the emotional and physical stress that organizational change can inflict on employees. But the world is rarely perfect and employees will be best served by learning how to manage their own responses to change in a way that can support their own health and well-being during times of change. It may be unrealistic to try to prevent resistance to change in its entirety but identifying supportive tools and techniques is certainly a reasonable expectation.

One concern I've identified through this research is that ultimately the person undergoing the change must be willing to take ownership of their reaction. They must be willing to be open-minded and do the self-reflection required to: acknowledge their own worry and resistance, identify opportunities to change their perspective, and commit to ways to move forward. If there is no willingness to take these steps, then there is little that any organization, coach, or even therapist, can do to help someone move through change in a more positive way.

Amy Seidl
CCT692 Processes of Research and Engagement
Assignment H: Draft of Final Report, Revision 1
12/13/2016

Amy Seidl
CCT692 Processes of Research and Engagement
Assignment H: Draft of Final Report, Revision 1
12/13/2016

References

Lamm, E., & Gordon, J. R. (2010). Empowerment, Predisposition to Resist Change, and Support

for Organizational Change. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, *17*(4), 426–

437. https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051809355595

Liane Davey. (n.d.). Are You Resisting Change? Retrieved December 8, 2016, from

http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/making-your-team-work/201404/are-you-

resisting-change-0

Mathews, A. (1990). Why worry? The cognitive function of anxiety. *Behaviour Research and*

Therapy, *28*(6), 455–468.

Pardo del Val, M., & Martínez Fuentes, C. (2003). Resistance to change: a literature review and

empirical study. *Management Decision*, *41*(2), 148–155.

https://doi.org/10.1108/00251740310457597

Peterson, L. G., & Pbert, L. (1992). Effectiveness of a meditation-based stress reduction program

in the treatment of anxiety disorders. *Am J Psychiatry*, *149*, 936–943.

Rafferty, A. E., & Griffin, M. A. (2006). Perceptions of organizational change: A stress and

coping perspective. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *91*(5), 1154–1162.

https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.91.5.1154

Wisse, B., & Sleebos, E. (2016). When Change Causes Stress: Effects of Self-construal and

Change Consequences. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, *31*(2), 249–264.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-015-9411-z