

Change Management In Practice: Why Does Change Fail?

Resistance to change may be active or passive, overt or covert, individual or organized, aggressive or timid and on occasions totally justified.

Sadly most significant change fails to meet the expectations and targets of the proposers. The failure is given the catchall name resistance, yet resistance can be principled and creative as well as from vested interest. Top management is frequently unreasonable in its expectations and time scale, forgetting the process it went through when it decided to make the change.

An effective change manager will prepare an organisation for change in the early stages of project definition and stakeholder review, by taking managers through a similar sales process and responding to their apparent resistance: the creative conflict.

This process is likely to improve the project definition and buy in. It will also ensure that it is clear the moment resistance becomes vested interest.

It is unrealistic to expect an independent change manager to tackle vested interest resistance but the change director can use his or her intervention as a signal to the organisation such interventions should be few but telling.

An independent change manager is a cross between a foil and a lightning conductor the foil ensuring that positive energy is deflected to the right place, the lightning conductor removing negative energy from the organization.

Avoiding failure: managing resistance

Resistance is a key element in why change fails.

A recent informal UK survey of 120 government transformation programmes identified that:

15% achieved their objectives

A further 20% failed to achieve their objectives but were nevertheless regarded as satisfactory

65% were unsatisfactory.

A subsequent discussion forum on ecademy.com identified 7 key reasons why change fails. (The list is virtually identical to one made by Kotter at Harvard 15 years ago).

1. The organisation had not been clear about the reasons for the change and the overall objectives. This plays into the hands of any vested interests.
2. They had failed to move from talking to action quickly enough. This leads to mixed messages and gives resistance a better opportunity to focus.

3. The leaders had not been prepared for the change of management style required to manage a changed business or one where change is the norm. Change programmes" fail in that they are seen as just that: "programmers". The mentality of "now we're going to do change and then we'll get back to normal causes the failure. Change as the cliché goes is a constant; so a one off programme, which presumably has a start and a finish, doesn't address the long-term change in management style.

4. They had chosen a change methodology or approach that did not suit the business. Or worse still had piled methodology upon methodology, programme upon programme. One organisation had 6 sigma, balanced scorecard and IIP methodology all at the same time.

5. The organisation had not been prepared and the internal culture had 'pushed back' against the change.

6. The business had 'ram raided' certain functions with little regard to the overall business (i.e. they had changed one part of the process and not considered the impact up or downstream) In short they had panicked and were looking for a quick win or to declare victory too soon.

7. They had set the strategic direction for the change and then the leaders had remained remote from the change (sometimes called 'Distance Transformation') leaving the actual change to less motivated people. Success has many parents; failure is an orphan.

Very few organisations will manage all 7! However any one in isolation will make the change programme inconsistent and aggravate resistance. Advance planning and stakeholder management will avoid some of these pitfalls. Furthermore the list is an invaluable diagnostic tool for identifying why (and where) resistance is taking place, giving an opportunity to defuse resistance by correcting the mistake.

Conclusion

Resistance can be healthy (a pearl can result)

Unknown, unanticipated, unquantified, unaddressed resistance will always be dangerous.

A badly thought out process and implementation will always result in resistance

An independent change manager can bring the independence, experience, and objectivity to manage resistance.

A successful change is essential in creating a change culture