Resistance to Change

Three Models for Understanding and Working with Resistance

conneradvisory

Introduction

Resistance to change is a natural reaction to disrupted expectations and the associated feeling of a loss of control. As such, resistance accompanies all major change. It doesn't matter whether it is self-initiated, invoked by others, or if the new circumstances are perceived as positive or negative. The greater the change, the greater the resistance is likely to be. Although resistance is inevitable, how organizations choose to address it (or whether they choose to ignore it) greatly affects the prospects for an endeavor's success.

This paper describes three models that are useful for understanding what happens when people withhold their support or actually push back on the change.

- One describes the sequence that develops when people resist after having an initial *positive* reaction to change.
- Another describes the sequence that develops when people react *negatively* to change from the beginning.
- A third uses commitment as a lens through which resistance can be better understood.

Change Is Easy When People Like It, Right?

It seems reasonable that, if a person likes what the change is promising to deliver, he or she will be supportive of the process for executing that initiative. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Here is how Daryl Conner describes how he came to that understanding.

> *My first memory of seeing people resist a positive change was in 1969 when I served on the staff of an Army rehabilitation center for drug and alcohol abuse. I was amazed to see the high divorce rate that took place soon after soldiers entered the program and began the recovery process. I couldn't figure out why the wife (in those days, our patients were all*

men) of an alcoholic would put up with her husband's destructive behavior for years only to file for divorce as he began to regain control of his life.

What eventually became clear was that because the husband was succeeding with sobriety (what the wife had been dreaming of for years) she now had to adjust to his reemergence into the family structure. She had been making economic decisions and providing sole parental guidance to the children for a long time. But once he was fully functioning again, he wanted to participate in these activities. She finally got what she wanted, but it came with a power struggle neither of them was prepared to handle. From her standpoint, although her husband's improved behavior and health was welcomed, she was not willing to surrender her hard-won autonomy. The marital roles and family hierarchy became subject to unexpected redefinition. The subsequent power struggle resulted in more pessimism for both husband and wife than either could recover from, which ultimately played itself out in a divorce.

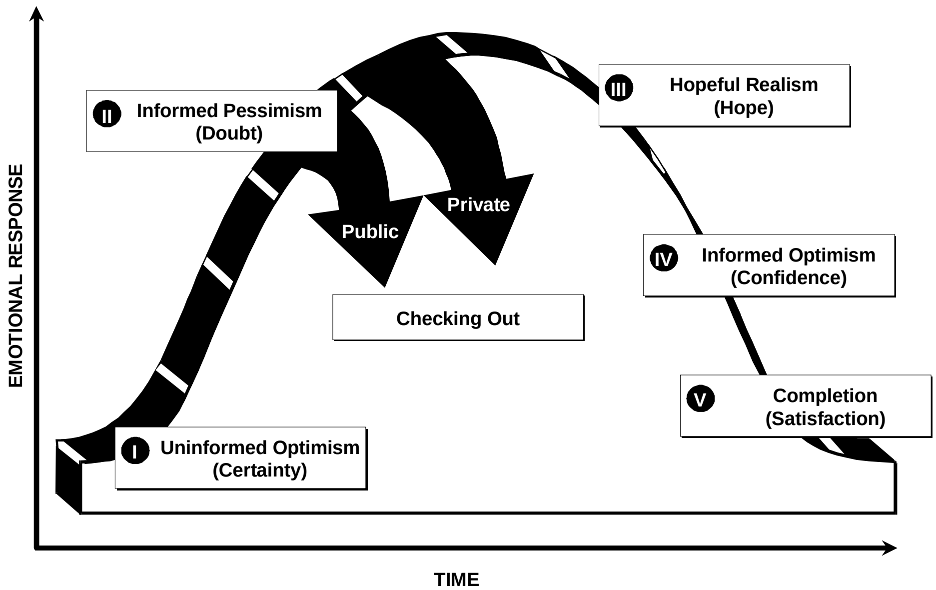
Years later, when I was first helping organizations implement key initiatives, this same sort of situation reappeared. I noticed that people who originally perceived a major change as positive, but later became disenchanted, followed a separate path of resistance than those who saw it as negative from the outset.

After observing this phenomenon for a number of years, he was able to describe the phases people go through when they originally embrace a change perceived to be beneficial, but resist it later.[1] The five phases are:

- Uninformed optimism
- Informed pessimism
- Hopeful realism
- Informed optimism
- Completion

In the graphic on page 3, the horizontal axis represents time; the vertical axis reflects the degree of discomfort or pessimism felt toward the change.

[1] With thanks to consultant and poet Don Kelly for his insight and willingness in 1974 to introduce Daryl Conner to this way of viewing the negative implications of positive change.



Phase I—Uninformed Optimism

Marriage is a classic example of a major positive change that people think is wonderful in the beginning but then have trouble adjusting to. Newlyweds haven't spent much "married" time together, so they are on the left-hand side of the time continuum. They are also on the low end of the pessimism scale because they feel extremely positive about each other and their decision to be together. Instead of the "honeymoon" period, think of this phase as "uninformed optimism"—naïve enthusiasm based on insufficient data.

The same is true for decisions to pursue major, highly advantageous change—they are always based on information that will later prove to be inadequate (maybe not inaccurate, but certainly less than complete). As the change unfolds, people learn that a great deal of what they were promised does not happen, and much for which they were not prepared begins to take place.

Phase II—Informed Pessimism

Over time, the husband and wife discover some of the real implications for their change decision. He learns how often she wants to eat out; she learns how often he wants to play golf. They begin to realize that, while their overall decision may have been a good one, there are significant downsides that they did not expect. Once again, organizations fall into the same pattern. They discover that the reorganization or new technology (that appeared so perfect when the decision to proceed was finalized) includes struggles and challenges no one saw coming.

There is no way to avoid this second phase of the process. It comes from the inevitable learning that takes place once people engage what appears to be a positive change and find out it is more difficult to execute than anticipated. "Informed pessimism" always follows uninformed optimism, and with it comes some degree of doubt and second-guessing.

The informed-pessimism stage is particularly important because every person has a certain tolerance for pessimism. If a person's disenchantment exceeds that tolerance level, "checking out" occurs. Informed pessimism is about doubt and reluctance; checking out is about withdrawing from the change decision. Both are forms of resistance, but by the time checking out starts to take place, the dissention can have a meaningful adverse impact on realizing the ultimate desired outcomes.

Checking out manifests itself either publicly or privately. People check out publicly when they are overt about their lack of confidence in moving forward. In the marriage situation, an example of public checking out is the delivery of a blunt statement such as, “I want a divorce.” The organizational equivalent of publicly checking out takes place when people are open and explicit about their newfound discontent. They might freely state things like, “Considering what we’ve recently learned, we’d better rethink our decision to move ahead.”

The alternative is for people to check out privately by going underground with their detachment. Many couples in this situation go through the mechanics of their marriage as if everything is fine, but the genuine exchange of love and respect for each other is gone: “What do you mean we need counseling? I don’t see any problems in our relationship.” The organizational version of this is to say, “Great idea! Let’s do that!” when in the presence of particular leaders, and “No way am I doing that!” when in front of others.

Both types of checking out jeopardize the success of a project, but the public form is clearly less destructive than the private form. At least with public checking out, there is an acknowledgment of the problems; this offers some chance of working through the difficulties. With private checking out, true concerns and emotions are dangerously hidden.

Although informed pessimism is inevitable, checking out is not. Whether or not a person checks out depends on each individual’s tolerance for pessimism. Some people are ready for a divorce within months of getting married; others can engage in decades of destructive behavior toward each other and never seriously consider separating.

Phase III—Hopeful Realism

If checking out never takes place, or if it occurs openly and the problems are brought to the surface and resolved, the concerns raised during informed pessimism have some likelihood of tapering off. When this happens, the pessimism does not suddenly disappear. Instead, it gradually lessens and people progressively move into “hopeful realism.” This phase isn’t a return to the naïve “everything is wonderful” days of uninformed optimism; it simply means that people are beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel.

In the hopeful realism stage, people still have a great number of issues to handle, but they begin to feel as if maybe they can pull it off.

Phase IV—Informed Optimism

As more and more concerns are resolved, people become increasingly confident and move into the “informed-optimism” stage. This stage reflects a stronger confidence in the change—one that has been earned through trial by fire.

Phase V—Completion

Once individuals adjust to the change, they can stabilize in the new status quo. It is only by advancing to this stage that installation or realization is possible.

Implications

There are many implications to be drawn from the model. Here are three to consider:

Recurring Cycles

Significant change projects don't experience just one pass through this model. About the time informed optimism sets in, new decisions are made about another aspect of the implementation process. If any of these determinations mean yet another departure from what was expected, in all likelihood, the judgment to move ahead will spawn a new round of uninformed optimism, and the cycle will begin again.

Sober Selling

Sponsors of change can sometimes be particularly vulnerable to "panacea merchants." These are people inside or outside the organization who exploit leaders' fantasies that the implementation of badly needed change will come with few problems. Of course, the reality is that any change that ushers in meaningful benefits has more complications to its execution than meet the eye.

It is also not unusual for sponsors to become panacea merchants themselves. In some cases, they may—in fact—be naïve to the level of disruption their initiative will bring. As a result, they sell the change to the Board, the shareholders, and/or the employees from a position of uninformed optimism. It is not that they are downplaying the pain that the change will bring; it is that they are truly not aware of how difficult it will be to execute successfully.

Too often, however, sponsors have a deeper sense of the difficulty that will be associated with a major initiative, but choose to soften their communications about the implications, or to ignore them altogether. They reason that the challenges will be faced when they arise, and that to announce them ahead of time will only heighten opposition. This logic fails to address the fact that one of the roots of resistance is a sense of loss of control. Being informed about what to expect—even when it is not what you want to hear—helps to return a sense of control to the targets of the change.

Beyond Change Execution

This model has broader potential utilization. For example—many people devote a great deal of their lives trying to hit "home runs" (solutions that promise tremendous benefit, but that are presented as relatively inexpensive and posing little risk). This model suggests that anytime one finds answers in his or her personal as well as organizational lives that seem to fit these criteria, it is probably an illusion. Anything of real value has a price tag. People are not obligated to buy what they say they want, but if they do, an invoice for the real cost will soon follow. Naiveté—thinking that perfection sought can be inexpensively obtained—often leaves them unprepared for the inevitable doubt and disenchantment (resistance) that develops after they start the journey and the bills come due.

The lesson here is, "Be careful of what you ask for because you might get it."

The Bottom Line

There are no panaceas when it comes to major change (regardless of the setting). Whenever people embark on significant endeavors that look extremely positive at the beginning, they are probably going to find that the changes are more difficult and expensive than were anticipated. If the financial, logistic, emotional, or relationship cost turns out to be too high, they can withdraw from the decision. On the other hand, if the doubt and subsequent pessimism that inevitably arises does not exceed their tolerance level, they have a greater chance of resolving their concerns and moving ahead. One thing is certain: In all scenarios involving change you will pay for getting what you want, or you pay for not getting what you want, but you will pay.

Sometimes People HATE the Change

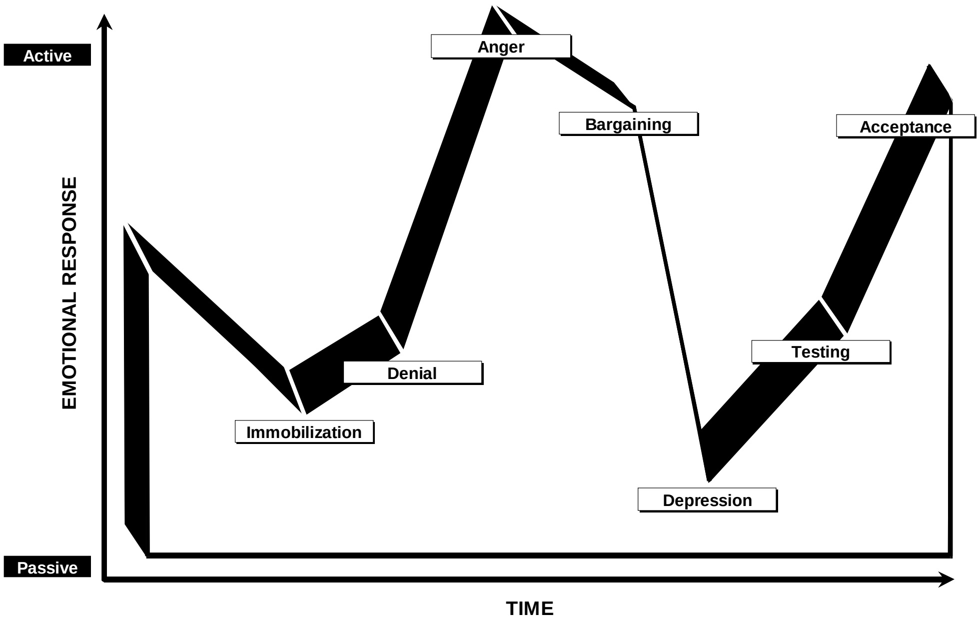
It doesn't matter whether a change is originally seen as positive or negative; when people's expectations are significantly disrupted, the result is resistance. However, the way people manifest their resistance differs according to how they view the change. Major transitions that are applauded at the beginning follow a pattern distinct from those that are disliked at first.

The most insightful work on the dynamics of negatively perceived change was originated by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. A psychiatrist by training, Kübler-Ross interviewed several hundred terminally ill patients and their families, eventually developing a means for understanding the process that people undergo as they come to terms with impending death. (This was first described in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying.*) According to her model, people evolve through a series of stages as they confront their own mortality or that of a loved one.

Her model is just as applicable to the corporate world as it is to a clinical environment. The emotional highs and lows are less intense in organizational settings; however, the sequence of the stages is just as relevant for executives who have to lay off valued, long-term employees (and for the employees themselves) as it is for families of the terminally ill. Dr. Kübler-Ross' model provides a way of understanding any negative change that people face but cannot control. In more recent years, her work has gained renown among organizational change practitioners throughout the world as a way to understand and manage negatively perceived change. Because of the frequency with which this model has been cited and explored in change-management literature, it is only necessary to highlight the key elements here.

Expanding on Kübler-Ross's five-stage model, Conner Partners has identified eight distinctive stages through which people pass whenever they feel trapped in a change they don't want and can't control. These stages are stability, immobilization, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, testing, and acceptance.

In the model shown on page 7, the horizontal axis represents the length of time the person has been aware of the change, and the vertical axis reflects the level of emotional activity that is displayed, ranging from passive to active.



Phase I—Stability

This phase precedes the announcement of the change. It represents the present state, or status quo.

Phase II—Immobilization

The initial reaction to a negatively perceived major change is shock. Reactions in this phase may vary from temporary confusion to complete disorientation. Here, the impact of the disruption is so alien to the person's frame of reference that he or she is often unable to relate to what is happening.

Phase III—Denial

This phase is characterized by an inability to assimilate new information into the current frame of reference. Here, change-related information is often rejected or ignored. Common reactions are, "It won't happen to me (us)." or "Don't overact; it will go away."

Phase IV—Anger

This phase is characterized by frustration and hurt, and is often manifested through irrational, indiscriminate lashing out. These emotions are typically directed at those in close proximity, who also are usually the ones most willing to be supportive, such as family, friends, medical staff, etc. for personal change. It is not uncommon for those closest to the person to be blamed, criticized, and treated with hostility.

Phase V—Bargaining

At this point in the process, people begin negotiating to avoid as many of the negative implications as possible. Bargaining takes many forms (e.g., requests for deadline extensions, reassignments, giving up some prior benefits—but not all, etc.). Bargaining behavior signals that an individual can no longer avoid a confrontation with reality. All earlier phases involve different forms of denial. This phase marks the very beginning of acceptance.

Phase VI—Depression

Depression is a normal response to major, negatively perceived change. The full extent of clinical depression (helplessness and hopelessness) is not usually found in organized settings, but resignation to failure, feeling victimized, a lack of emotional and physical energy, and disengagement from one's work are likely symptoms.

Although it is an unpleasant experience, depression can represent a positive step in the acceptance process. At this point, the full weight of the negative change is finally acknowledged. Given the perceived severity of the consequences, the fact that someone would respond in this manner should not come as a surprise. There is no doubt that this period is uncomfortable, but it is quite normal for these feelings to surface.

Phase VII—Testing

Regaining a sense of control helps people free themselves from feelings of victimization and depression. They can do this by acknowledging the real limitations while also exploring ways to redefine goals. This makes it possible to recalibrate new expectations so success within new boundaries is possible.

Phase VIII—Acceptance

At this point, people can respond to the change realistically. Acceptance, however, is not synonymous with liking what is happening. It just means that the person is now more grounded and productive within the new context. It is possible that people who have reached this phase may never agree with or like what has happened, but they are committed to ensuring that they leverage the situation as much as possible to their advantage.

Working with targets as they pass through the negative-response model is an intense process because providing the appropriate support at each phase consumes time and energy. Nevertheless, the failure of a key person to complete the sequence can be even more costly. There is no guarantee that people will move successfully through each of the phases, but they have the best chance when they are led by sponsors who understand the dynamics being played out.

Although the dynamics of negatively perceived organizational change are less intense than the grief associated with a death, the modified Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' model has proven to be highly effective in helping people who feel trapped in a change they don't want and can't control.

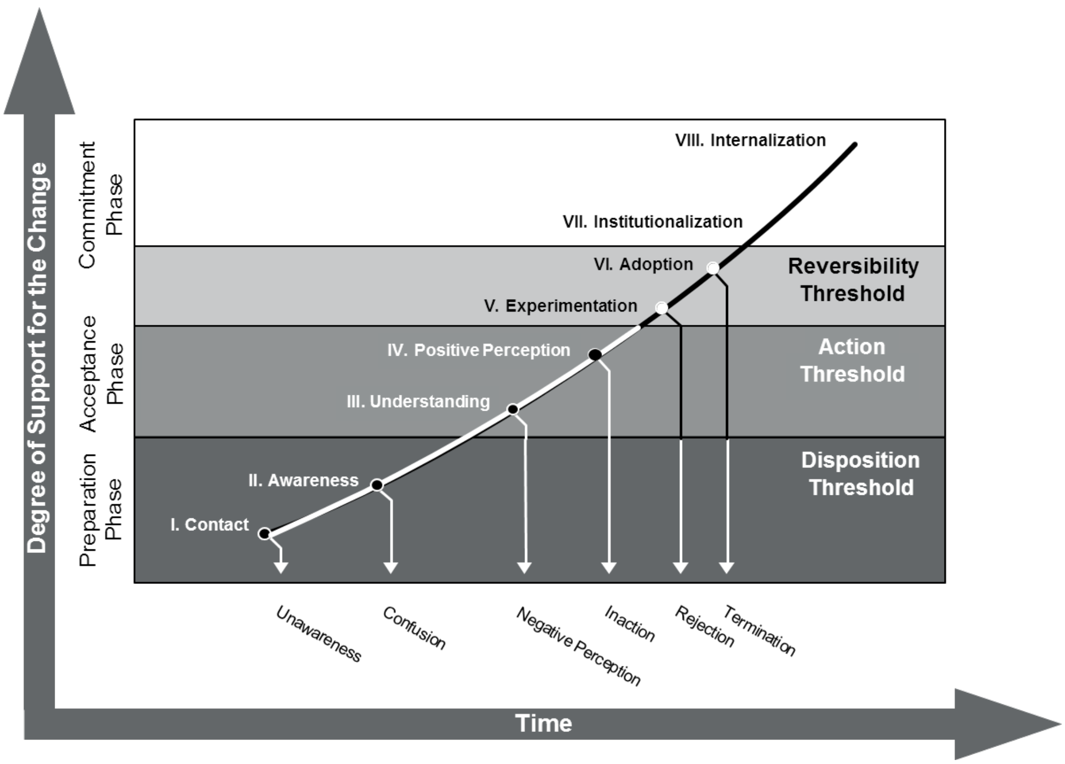
How to Use Commitment to Understand Resistance

The third model requires a bit of paradoxical thinking because it involves utilizing commitment as a doorway to seeing the dynamics of resistance. Commitment is powerful, but often misunderstood. There are five ways people display commitment:

- Invest resources such as time, energy, and money to ensure the desired outcome
- Pursue the goal consistently over time, even when under stress
- Reject ideas or action plans that promise short-term benefits but are inconsistent with the overall strategy for ultimate goal achievement

- Stand fast in the face of adversity, remaining determined and focused in the quest for the desired goal
- Apply creativity, ingenuity, and resourcefulness to resolving problems or issues that would otherwise block the achievement of the goal

Given this, it is easy to see why commitment is so important to the success of organizational change. It is the cement that provides the critical bond between people and the change process, yet most people involved in organizational change know very little about what commitment is, what it requires, how it is built, and how it can be lost. The commitment curve (below) provides a model for building and sustaining commitment.



The vertical axis represents the degree of support for the new mindsets and behaviors, and the horizontal axis reflects the passage of time. The model consists of three developmental phases—*Preparation, Acceptance,* and *Commitment—and* the stages unique to each phase. Each stage represents a juncture critical to the development of commitment to change, where a change may stall (depicted by downward arrows) or advance (represented by an advance to the next stage). In addition, as people learn more about the change and what it will require, they may return to earlier stages in the process. The successful transition through a particular stage serves as the basis for experiencing the next stage.

Here are a few examples of resistance dynamics revealed through a commitment lens:

- Resistance can't exist prior to reaching the "disposition threshold." People may be "unaware" or "confused," but actual resistance can't materialize until they form an opinion. They must believe they have gained enough information or impressions to "understand" (from their perspective) what is happening. If that understanding has created a "negative perception" about the change or the people driving it, resistance in some form (strong/weak, overt/covert) is the likely response.

- Once on the other side of the disposition threshold, other junctures where resistance is an option are:
    - positive perceptions, leading to inaction,
    - experimentation, leading to rejection, and
    - adoption, leading to termination.
- Resistance can and does form at the institutionalization and internalization levels as well. Even though these two stages are noted for being in the "no reversibility" zone, that doesn't mean resistance doesn't occur. It means that the sponsor's response to any pushback should be much more adamant than in earlier stages. By this point in the process, leaders have declared that the change will proceed, regardless of any opposition. The only variable is whether the sponsors take the institutionalization route and choose to overpower the resistance with compliance-centric maneuvers (going for bodies, not souls), or the internalization path and try to foster mindset and behavior shifts (going for bodies *and* souls).
- Although most people think resistance stems from the targets of change, all roles are subject to becoming resistant to the intended outcomes because all the roles are populated by humans in transition who are having their expectations disrupted on a routine basis. In fact, some of the strongest pushback often comes from the very sponsors who are initiating a change. The best way to relate to this is to remember that all are targets before assuming any other role.

Expect Resistance and Learn to Leverage It to Ensure Change Success

The three models (positively perceived change, negatively perceived change, and the various degrees of commitment) help explain some of the dynamics of resistance and how they might be used to address disenchantment and antagonism.

The objective in using any of these frameworks is to convert the negative energy associated with resistance into an advantage for moving the organization toward full realization of the intended change outcomes.

- Resistance to major change occurs regardless of whether change is initially perceived as positive or negative and without regard to whether it is self-initiated or brought on by others.
- Unless people are free to express their reservations about an impending change, deep resolve for an initiative's success will be inhibited. Doubt is actually an important aspect of the commitment-building process, so when resistance is surfaced in productive ways, it helps turn skepticism into support.

With transformational change, some degree of resistance is unavoidable. In fact, if resistance is not being seen, there are only two explanations—the change is either being superficially installed or the resistance has gone underground.

Here are some key points to keep in mind when dealing with resistance:

- Although resistance can be challenging to deal with, it is an ally when it comes to orchestrating realization outcomes.
- View resistance as a valuable source of information about the risks to realization prognosis.
- Find models that can be used to help understand when, how, and why resistance forms and what can be done about it.
- Have access to methods and tools that can be used to help surface resistance. Sponsors should provide an environment—and channels—that allow it to be discussed in a safe and productive way.
- A great deal of emotional investment is necessary to achieve the desired outcome of strategic initiatives. Intellectual commitment typically precedes emotional commitment and thus, in some ways, is easier to come by. That is, people may quickly grasp the implications of a change at a rational level but then find that they need more time and effort to make the necessary emotional adjustments.
- Don't allow resistance to become a detour that keeps the organization from moving forward. Not every expression of resistance is appropriate, nor should it be allowed to continue to the point of jeopardizing realization.

