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The Tower of Babel and the Rally Driver: Understanding and Negotiating through Resistance to Organizational Change

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Resistance to change can be the single most difficult hurdle that change management practitioners face when working in organizations. Understanding that resistance, as a facet of human interaction, is far more complex than simply an act of X against Y is key to breaking through lines of understanding that are often obscured with political, social, and personal rhetoric. In the paper that follows, the author (an organizational psychologist) discusses two facets of resistance which he considers as fundamental to our understanding of (a) interpersonal, intrapersonal, and organizational narratives and (b) the cycle of change and resistance to it. The author uses a case study to illustrate these points and concludes with a checklist of practical lessons and further questions when encountering resistance to change in the workplace.

There is an old saying that "the only two things that are certain in life are death and taxes." Indeed, in the business world, organizations rise and fall; grow and shrink; and, with few exceptions, get taxed all along the way. Nevertheless, there is one additional truth that could be said to encompass both of the truths referred to above–change.

Organizational change, or business transformation, is as much a reality of any organization as is its life cycles and the level at which it is taxed. In fact, death and taxes are expressions of change. If we want to be more specific about the certainties of life, we could probably reduce it to one truism: the only constant in life *is* change. Whether this change is gradual or explosive has been the subject of debate amongst anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists alike for quite some time now (NHS Institute for Innovation & Improvement, 2006). However, change is not the focus of this article. Rather, it is *resistance to change* that is the focal point of discussion; because as any organizational change practitioner and organizational employee/employer will know, the greatest single threat to successful change in a business is resistance to it on the part of its stakeholders. It is with this thought in mind that we turn to the title of this article: "The Tower of Babel and the Rally Driver." Why the title? The meaning behind the image will become more apparent as we walk through the terrain that is *resistance*.

Understanding Resistance: The Tower of Babel

The word *resistance* has many applications ranging from the scientific to the political, the psychological to the organizational. What does it mean in the organizational context? When

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faced with change, some will embrace it; others will remain standing and place themselves in a position that does not allow for much movement. Resistance to change, however, is not a one-sided affair. This position is all too common and all too easy to adopt because it assumes that one party in the change negotiation is to blame. On closer inspection, however, one sees that both sides (those embracing the change and those not) are resisting because neither is willing to move from the position they have chosen for themselves. This should come as no surprise to those who have undergone any kind of business transformation. In fact, it is most overtly demonstrated at both an interpersonal and intrapersonal level through statements and thoughts as well as through nonverbal and organizational means. For those embracing change, therefore, resistance is evidenced in statements and thoughts such as: "They just do not understand why this change is important." and "It is going to happen whether they like it or not." On the other hand, for those resisting the change, statements and thoughts appear in the form of: "These guys just do not understand what we need" and "They have not thought through the change and its impact on us." At the organizational level, this may be manifested in the types of communication people receive from the top and the language used therein.

Resistance to change is often viewed as a defense mechanism, in the negative sense of the word. Psychology teaches us, however, that the employment of a defense mechanism is not necessarily negative. This is what makes resistance to change such a complex matter; in some instances, resisting a particular change may be a good thing. The latter would arise either because the organization is not ready for it or because the outcome may neither be beneficial for the individual nor for the group (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999). The decision-making process as to whether or not to embrace a change is thus both a product of the internal conversations we have with ourselves and the external conversations we have with those around us and may be influenced by factors such as culture. As Piderit (2000) pointed out, what some managers may perceive as disrespectful or unfounded resistance to change might be motivated by an individual's ethical principles or cultural background. This thinking also underscores the importance of the narratives we create both internally and with those around us as well as the narrative created in our relationships with the organizations for which we work.

Narratives contain within them sources of information and knowledge that act as means to exercise power in a manner that includes some but not others (Flecher & Bailyn, 2005). Language (in this case, the language of change and resistance to it) is key to our understanding of resistance because it plays a role in mediating the relationship between knowledge and power. This means that the prevailing social reality is not a given but something that is constructed through the process of representing experience (Fairclough, 1989). When it comes to resistance to change, the language that is used by both people in the change negotiation maintains and sustains the power relationships that depend on it. So, what can we practically take away from all of this when trying to negotiate through resistance to change in an organization?

Human resource, organizational development/change, and/or organizational design practitioners often engage change with the view that it is either necessary or the right thing to do or both. When a client identifies the need for change and a change practitioner confirms this need with surveys and questionnaire results, the question that should be asked is, "What is driving the need for change and what relationships are trying to be built or maintained?" Returning to the image portrayed in the first part of the title of this article (the Tower of Babel), the reader will recall that the tower was created as a means of reaching heaven and serves as an allegory for the creation of different languages on Earth. However, the story also tells us that while the initial intention was to build a means of reaching God, it soon came to represent the

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greed of humanity and concluded with God punishing humans by making them speak in foreign tongues. The net result: communication stopped, work was halted, and the builders scattered to different parts of the world. Given the earlier discussion on language and the power differentials it can create, we can draw several vital lessons for our discussion on resistance to change:

- *Know for whom you are building the tower*: Creating and developing a process or product can be hugely rewarding, but not if there is no value or meaning attached to it. The first lesson to be learned, therefore, is: ***understand the drivers for change and what the change means***. By doing this, you are ensured of neither playing into existing power differentials in the client organization nor of purely pushing through your own intentions. The end result is dealing with concerns that could lead to resistance from the outset.
- *Collaborate, do not just agree*: When organizations are about to undergo or are undergoing change, there is often agreement in some quarters regarding the proposed outcome of the change but not in others. By creating a discursive space; new ways of thinking can surface, and dominant meanings can be resisted (Flecher & Bailyn, 2005). This happens because taken-for-granted assumptions can be relaxed through the envisaging of new organizational realities. The lesson here is: ***find a language that is understood by all***.
- *Organizations have stories too*: All organizations have a history. This history is created not only by its leaders and its people but by prevailing market conditions. As an organizational change practitioner; one of your challenges will be to understand the conditions under which the organization was set up, the conditions under which it is currently operating, and to what degree the original culture is still pervasive. Understanding and applying this information means you have a better sense of where the resistance is coming from, as well as what it represents for those who are resisting the change. The lesson here is: ***knowing your past means knowing your present***.

Resistance and the Cycle of Change: The Rally Driver

In the last 10-15 years, there has been a move to think of change and resistance to it in terms of transitions and transitional phenomena (Bolognese, 2002). Thus, the process of change has been seen as the process of moving from one way of doing things to another. For Bridges (1991), it is not the actual change that individuals resist but rather the transition that must be made to accommodate the change. He stated,

> Change is not the same as transition. Change is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy. Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal. Unless transition occurs, change will not work. (pp. 3-4)

Similarly, Coetsee (1999) explained resistance to change by looking at it through the lens of a continuum model. For Coetsee, rather than viewing acceptance of change (commitment) and rejection of change (resistance) as separate phenomena, we should be viewing them as being closely linked. They represent a polarity, with each being the far end of the continuum. Moving from resistance to commitment, therefore, is done through sequential phases contained within the continuum.

The image of a rally driver is apt when considering resistance to change in terms of transitional phenomena. Rally drivers, after all, have to make several transitions be it in speed or the stages of a race. They need to constantly negotiate changing terrain and come out of it in the

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smoothest manner possible. While not a rally driver, the author has used the metaphor because there are two basic things about rally driving that apply directly to the topic under discussion: (a) different points of the racecourse require different approaches on the part of the driver, and (b) the driver is at a loss without his or her navigator. The myriad of theories on the subject of resistance to change, however, make it somewhat more difficult to know (a) where on the course you are and (b) how to navigate your way through the next point of the cycle with the help of a range of people all of whom may have differing opinions about what to do next. Add to this the complexities of language and the power it affords some and not others, and one can begin to appreciate the scale of the issue change practitioners face almost daily in their work. This then begs a very simple question: "What approach is one to take?" If the answer were simple, resistance to organizational change would never have been researched to the degree that it has been. However, here are a couple of lessons learned from the field of consulting:

- *Chart your course:* Elite rally drivers and their navigators try and get as familiar with the terrain and the course they are planning to navigate *before* they race. The same rule applies to organizational change practitioners. The lesson learned here is: ***know the lay of the land*.**
- *Choose your approach, but learn when to be flexible*: If you have ever watched a motor sport race, you will know that the approach the drivers take when going into a corner rests on achieving pinpoint precision and getting out of the corner in the least time consuming way. If you are not a keen motor sport fan, then think about what one does when changing lanes or turning a corner: choose an approach and then stick with it. However, the driver leaves room to make a change if needed, because one can never really predict what is going to happen on the road. The same can be said of negotiating through resistance to change. The lesson to be learned here is: ***know when you need to change your approach to change.***
- *Pushing the brakes does not equate to coming to a standstill:* All too often, change engagements are put under undue (and often unrealistic) time pressures to deliver a change. This means that in environments in which there is already a cautious stance towards the change or where people are not ready for change, there will be greater resistance to it. This is particularly true in cases where an organization tries to rush through a change in the hope that goals can be achieved quickly and painlessly. The reality, however, is that stress levels increase and job satisfaction levels decline because they are being asked to leave the familiar behind (de Jager, 2001). In the world of rally driving, no accomplished driver ever did himself or herself any favor by not applying the brakes at the right moment. The same lesson can be applied to organizational change practitioners: ***slowing down is not the same as stopping altogether***.

Having gone through the lessons learned, we are now in a position to see how they apply to a case study. To facilitate this process, a summary table has been added for easy reference (see Table 1).

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Table 1

Top Tips for Those Facing Resistance to Organizational Change

Lesson	Questions to consider
1. Understand the drivers for change and what the change means	• Who is this change really for? • What are the desired goals of the change? • What does the change mean to people in the organization, and how do they view it?
2. Find a language that is understood by all	• Do you understand what is being asked of you? • Does the client understand what you are asking of them? • In what terms is the need for change expressed? • Is the change request politically loaded?
3. Knowing your past means knowing your present	• What is the historical attitude of the organization to change? • What is the prevailing culture in the organization? Does it favor change? • What has worked in the distant past? What has worked more recently?
4. Know the lay of the land	• Who are the key stakeholders in the organization? • Can you comfortably describe the organization's culture? • Can you identify the barriers and facilitators of change? • Can you identify potential barriers and facilitators to change and respond ahead of time?
5. Know when you need to change your approach to change.	• Is your approach to change achieving intended results? • If not, what needs to be adjusted? • Is it time to consider the options open to you? • Are you reaching people at all levels of the organization?
6. Slowing down is not the same as stopping altogether	• What is the pace of change usually like in the organization? • What is the pace at which you are trying to implement change in the organization? • Are you making time to take stock of what is going on?

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Making Sense of It All: A Case In Point

The paper has so far discussed some of the theoretical tenets of organizational change and resistance to it. The discussion has presented practitioners with some of the key challenges they will face when encountering resistance to change in their work and has made some suggestions about how to deal effectively with them. Before concluding, it would be useful to look at a brief case study in which resistance to change was present and how it was addressed.

The author was asked to assist in a behavioral analysis of several deployment teams and a management team working in a large public sector organization. Both the deployment teams and the management teams were made up of civil servants and consultants. At the time of the first meeting, the teams had gone through their first deployment (IT) cycle together with stress levels reaching reported disproportionate levels; some of the team members had even threatened to leave the project. At the time of the initial meeting, the relationship between deployment team members and the management team were fractious. Changes in seating plans, the physical separation of management from deployment teams (before, they sat closer together or in the same work space), and political maneuvering within the management team meant that (a) messages were often miscommunicated and (b) the deployment teams felt that there was a distinct lack of structure and direction in the project. To add to the internal difficulties, budgetary restraints meant that the engagement was not to last longer than 12 working days; only 12 working days in which to gain people's trust, conduct an analysis, run workshops with deployment and management teams, make recommendations as to how the recommendations should be driven forward, and roll off the engagement feeling that everything that could be done was done in the allotted time.

In many situations, the above scenario could quite appropriately be described as a train wreck. Engagements of this kind rarely give the practitioner time to do anything meaningful if change is to be positively affected, if at all. In fact, in many cases, practitioners would be encouraged to proceed with caution; when you enter a mine field, things tend to get pretty messy. Furthermore, engagements that have a particularly political feel to them often result in different players having different levels of access to information meaning that messages get crossed, people begin to doubt the efficacy of the process (if they did not already), and resistance to change is increased. Nevertheless, the engagement was accepted and began with some detailed discussions about the nature of the change, resistance to it, and what the project managers hoped to get out of the 12-day engagement. As stated earlier, discussions of this nature are very important and highly useful in order to cover your tracks and give you room to decline an engagement if you think that it would do more damage than good. They are also vital if you are to understand the meanings that people import into the change process and what the source of their resistance might be.

Following the initial in-depth discussion, 1-1 semistructured focus interviews were held with each member of the deployment and management teams. The results covered both predeployment and postdeployment issues as well as relations between civil servants and consultants at all levels in the teams. While everyone was happy to speak openly about the issues they faced, most of the civil servant staff were highly skeptical as to whether anything meaningful would be done with the information. For the most part, their experience with the consultants was not a positive one; and they questioned my ability to remain objective, considering the author was employed by the consulting firm. Gaining their trust was the first hurdle that had to be overcome for the engagement to succeed.

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In order to achieve trust, several additional conversations with civil servant and consultancy staff were held with the aim of achieving some quick wins/actions that could be put into place with reasonable haste. At the top of the agenda was coaching some of the more junior consultants who were highly ambitious and driven to learn from, listen to, and show respect for the civil servants that were several years their senior both in age and experience. Secondly, every effort was made to sit among the deployment team members so that they would get to know the author and so that he could understand the culture of the organization better through continued conversations with staff. Time was also spent with members of the management team, some of whom had once been deployment team members. Thirdly, an initial line of communication was established between some of the management team members and the deployment team members as well as between the deployment team members themselves. This was crucial as communication was one of the biggest barriers to successful working relations on the project.

Once the initial quick-win steps were put into action, the next step involved presenting the results of the focus interviews to both the deployment and management teams. It was decided that owing to the already difficult nature of the relationship between the teams, two sessions should be held (one with the deployment and one with the management teams) so people could be given free rein to add anything in a safe environment. This was then fed back to each of the teams, and recommendations were made to the management team. Of interest to the author was that some of the management team members (and one in particular) distanced themselves from the first meeting and avoided the focus interview altogether despite various attempts. However, when they started to realize that something was going to be done with the information, they attended subsequent workshops and shared their views about what they felt the next steps should be. This was particularly significant because some of the individuals had expressed their discomfort with “soft issues” to several members of the management team. During these sessions, it was also suggested that someone in the senior team should be responsible for driving the recommendations forward and being the go-between for the management and deployment teams. Although one of the more senior members was a natural choice; their stress levels were particularly high, and there was some concern about their lack of visibility across the deployment teams (over and above their stress-related behavior). It was thus decided to choose a slightly more junior member in the interim, one who had previously been a deployment team member. At last check (1 month ago), the author was informed that the more senior individual had taken over the role as the go-between and was having regular update meetings with the teams and giving them a greater sense of direction regarding where the project was heading.

Conclusion

Looking back, it is clear that there were a multitude of layers of resistance to the presence of the author on the ground in the aforementioned engagement. Some of these are difficult to express in words because they often took the form of nonverbal expressions. Thus, resistance was present when people regularly did not attend meetings, cancelled several meetings at the last minute and did not respond to follow-up e-mails, openly expressed disinterest in the process, said all the right words but did not back them up with actions, or said one thing and did the exact opposite. Such behaviors are commonplace in organizations on a day-to-day basis, particularly in change management engagements, and can derail processes regardless of the best intentions in the world.

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Keeping tabs on what is coming up (as a rally driver would do) and navigating your way through these pitfalls and choosing when it is/is not appropriate to engage the client on these issues are keys to a successful engagement. Establishing trust as soon as possible, as the example illustrated, is key; without trust, little can be achieved. Change management, after all, is principally about people. Ultimately, resistance to change is not merely a case of X against Y; rather, it is a complex web weaved by language and the interpretation thereof, a web that can become uncomfortably sticky when all voices are not heard and when the prevailing ideologies are those of a few people holding positions of power. By acknowledging people's individual experiences of change and by understanding the drivers and the meaning behind their resistance to change, one can help to create an environment in which negotiation is possible and alternate organizational realities can be explored.

About the Author

Guy Cohen is an organizational psychologist with a focus on leadership development and organizational behavior. He has worked across a range of industries in both South Africa and the UK. Currently, he is a manager in the People & Change practice at Deloitte Consulting. E-mail: gcohen@deloitte.co.uk

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