Encyclopedia of Organizational Psychology Entry:

Resistance

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Abstract

When we think of resistance, we also think of elimination due to the overwhelming amount of research and practical examples of why resistance is negative however, this entry discusses resistance from a different perspective. Resistance creates energy and that very energy can be channelled to benefit higher objectives whilst creating opportunities for employees to engage in. This entry firstly explains the root causes of the negative assumptions of resistance before moving on to the idea of 'positive resistance'. Secondly, the entry explores theoretical concepts related to positive resistance before detailing practical examples and avenues for future research.

Introduction

Organizations face ongoing pressures from the outside environment which causes them to continually reconfigure themselves without sustainable and dependable mechanisms to aid the change process. This has led to organizations seeking advice from a wealth of sources including academic, governmental, professional bodies and management consulting organizations who offer change management tools and techniques. The subject of change management has also attracted an increasing amount of attention from academia with a rising tide of research. Much of the advice available tends to offer similar recommendations. The question remains, however, that with so much advice available, why is change management still a major concern for organizations?

Current failure rates of change programmes lies in the range 60-70% with resistance to change emphasised as one of the primary reasons for failure. Due to this high statistic, it is vital that future research investigates alternative ways to approaching resistance to change. Classical writings in this area defines the term as an 'obstacle' or a 'restraint' which needs to be minimized in order for change to be successful. It is widely accepted that the human behaviour associated with resistance to change is innate, natural, inevitable, irrational, dysfunctional and counterproductive.

The most commonly used change management model is Lewin's (1951) three-stage process of unfreeze, change, refreeze, now regarded as the classic approach to managing change. Within the model, Lewin (1951) defines resistance as a 'restraining force' moving in the direction of maintaining the status quo. However, many have criticised the work of Lewin, suggesting that the concept is not flexible or adaptive in today's complex environment. Since Lewin's model, many alternative models have appeared. However, many of the profound change management models since Lewin's are not necessarily new, but an adapted or refined model of the original three-stage freeze, change and unfreeze model. These 'step by step' tools dominate the practical guidance on change management, with assumptions that the change process is manageable, straight forward, and with a predictable outcome. Within these models, resistance to change is often viewed as an unwanted force perpetuating unnecessary obstacles in the way of change success and firm performance.

Noticeably, resistance to change is inherently human, and at the heart of any change process are humans who must adapt to change, as without them, successful change is not possible. Ignoring the human element is not realistic when applied practically which is why traditional models of change management are often unrealistic in real world settings. Researchers have long been questioning the traditional view of resistance and therefore, efforts have been made aimed at understanding the individuals involved. However, much of this research on understanding the individual and psychological aspects of resistance and change, often aims to purely broaden the organizational perspective and benefit those initiating change. A key scholar in this field, Oreg (2003), put forward an alternative view

that resistance was dispositional and inherent of the individual. Dispositional resistance to change is defined as a negative personal orientation toward the notion of change. The theory conceptualises resistance as a combination of three types comprising of an emotional state and a cognitive state, as well as a behavioural state. However, dispositional resistance is also criticised for implying blame of resistance to organizational change is based on individual personalities rather than the change itself or how it is managed.

As we can see, resistance to change is a complex term without a commonly accepted definition. However, the common view throughout the literature is that resistance to change is negative causing management to worry when faced with a resistant workforce. However, what if the negative assumption of resistance is one of the biggest mistakes scholars and practitioners are making? What if it was the inability of management to see resistance as a positive force that causes failure of the change implementation rather than resistance in itself? Instead of practitioners putting all their efforts into finding ways to avoid or overcome resistance, perhaps it is more beneficial for them to see the positive side of resistance and work with it.

Positive resistance

Theoretical concepts

There are other ideas that resistance is not always a negative force and researchers have begun to consider resistance as potentially useful (Ford et al., 2008; Ford & Ford, 2009; Courpasson et al, 2012; Waddell & Sohal, 1998).

Firstly, Ford et al. (2008) propose resistance can be described as an opportunity for bargaining between management and employees. The act of resisting creates an opportunity for employees to put forward a counter-offer to which management can decide whether to accept or reject. Noticeably, management have the power of whether to decide to use and act on the feedback. Later work by the authors (Ford & Ford, 2009) describes organizational examples where resistance has been positive for the organization. Although resistance is seen in more a positive light in both studies, this relies heavily on the change managers. Therefore, this approach seems to remain associated with a management perspective rather than the employee perspective. These examples also raise the question about who has the power to label the resistance as beneficial. Moreover, if change managers fail to grasp the relevance of employees claims, it will be difficult for the

resistance to be favoured in a productive sense. Other issues arise when management ignore resistance rather than considering it to be productive, under the fear of losing face.

A study by Courpasson et al. (2012) puts forward the concept of 'productive resistance'. The term is defined as "those forms of protest that develop outside of institutional channels (such as unions); it is concerned with concrete activities that aim to voice claims and interests that are usually not taken into account by management decisions. Its goal is to foster the development of alternative managerial practices that are likely to benefit the organization as a whole" (Courpasson et al., 2012, p. 801). In their study, Courpasson et al. (2012) compare two case studies with a similar outcome. Resistance from employees resulted in a strong influence of top management decisions and thus the changes were altered. Instead of employees proposing 'counteroffers' to which management have the power to decide whether to accept or reject, employees have a greater influence in almost forcing management to rethink their change strategy. The resisters in both examples, carefully curated a plan and executed their voices and views with skill and profession, outlining the difficulties of changes and proposed new ideas which were therefore, taken seriously by management. The resistance leader had particular influence over others which meant it was difficult for managers to ignore.

Granted, not all resistance may be considered as productive and can often be overlooked by management. Therefore, this process may not be successful in other cases. Furthermore, the way in which resisters put their voices across will be vital too if management will listen.

Examples of positive resistance

"Resistance can be a valuable resource in the accomplishment of change" (Ford & Ford, 2009: 24).

When describing potential benefits of resistance, it is important to consider those benefits of managerial interest and those of employee interest. Positive resistance can be defined similarly to productive resistance. However, the definition is extended to include those acts of resistance which not only benefit the organizations but also the resisters. Next, we explain some of the key benefits of resistance to change from both perspectives.

Increased communication

"(Resistance) is a sign of engagement, an opening for a dialogue about the realities of the organization and the ways managers can implement their plans and strategies in coherence with those realities." (Ford & Ford, 2009, p 35)

The act of resistance opens an opportunity for change managers to assess whether the message has been communicated effectively to the employees. It demonstrates whether the employees have the same understanding of the change, and if there are important pieces of information missing or issues of miscommunication. This gives change leaders the opportunity to justify why change is necessary and ensure that the changes are expressed in a way that enhances the organization.

When employees actively resist, it shows that change has been communicated to them. Not only is it important to justify why change is important for the organization, but the employees also need to hear how the changes will affect and potentially benefit them. Resistance from employees is not necessary directed towards the change itself but rather than towards he potential consequences of the change. The fear of the unknown can be difficult, and employees may wonder how changes will affect them. This could range from job losses, to increased workload and changing job profiles. Considering how the change will affect the workforce but also how it might benefit them in the short and long term is critical during this process. Resistance, therefore, opens a two-way communication channel which provides opportunities for these discussions to take place. This opportunity provides a platform for change leaders to justify why the change is necessary and highlights the benefits for the employees which may in turn increase engagement and buy in for the organization and ease the fear of the unknown for the employees. Ford and Ford (2009) use an example of the US Navy when an introduction of Total Quality Leadership was implemented. The Navy found that criticism kept people talking about the ideas and gave leaders opportunities to clarify and justify aspects of the change. It was concluded that this phase generated new understandings which contributed to the acceptance and expansion of the change.

Identifying flaws in the change design

"Resistance plays a critical role in drawing attention to aspects of change that may be inappropriate, not well thought through, or perhaps plain wrong" (Waddell & Sohal, 1998, p 547).

The act of employee resistance can be critical in identifying flaws in the design of the change and in some extreme cases stop potential damaging changes being implemented. When employees resist, they will assess the possible damaging consequences of the change which may have been overlooked. Embracing this outcome of resistance can be considered a good source of learning and receiving feedback on change, if the organization is open minded and ready to listen. Research shows that leaders who admit mistakes are viewed as more credible, however, many are reluctant to do so (Ford & Ford, 2009). Therefore, when change leaders are willing to admit a miscalculation in the change design this can earn them empathy and respect from others. There is a great opportunity here to carry out risk assessments on situations which may not have been thought about before. Once flaws are identified and potential damaging consequences are assessed, this may result in a heavy cost saving. Therefore, there may well be a financial benefit of resistance to change.

For the workforce, taking ownership of identifying flaws and providing solutions will ensure their skills and abilities are seen. In the study mentioned earlier (Courpasson et al., 2012), the individual leading the resisters was in turn promoted rather than the act of resisting going against her/him. More often than not, employees may not feel comfortable expressing resisting views to their leaders in fear of negative backlash. In other cases, this can ultimately go in the favour of the employee's career and progression. Therefore, in some cases it is in the individual's best interest to voice opinions and offer strategic solutions to showcase their abilities, willingness, and confidence as a great asset to the organization.

An opportunity for innovation

"Resistance becomes a critical source of innovation in a change process as more possibilities are considered and evaluated" (Waddell & Sohal, 1998, p 545)

Taking on differing ideas and perspectives in an active way can contribute to increased organizational innovation. Often, leaders are transfixed on their vision, and may find it

difficult to listen to differing perspectives. If resistance is embraced rather than supressed and employees are engaged in a positive way, then they have the opportunity to find solutions to potential problems. The discussions generate new possibilities of doing the change, therefore, the process of resisting opens a two-way communication space which may lead to a more innovative way of doing the change thus, contributing to overall organizational innovation.

For the organization this may be key in shaping the change before implementation, and for the employees this opens an opportunity to utilise and improve their skills. Firstly, this gives an opportunity to improve on desirable skills based on creativity such as problem-solving skills, and generation of unique ideas. Secondly, the ownership of creative ideas and space to implement those ideas increases the employee's intrinsic motivation, work engagement, and sense of autonomy, all of which contribute to a happier working life. Therefore, individuals who are motivated to be involved in the innovative process of change, could end up benefiting more than those who are not.

In the study by Oreg (2002) it was reported that individuals with high levels of cognitive rigidity and routine seeking are more likely to resist change. Both of these sources of resistance are of creative inheritance therefore, if an individual decides to act on creativity rather than supress it, the likelihood is that change is easier to adapt to.

Voices are heard

"A further advantage that resistance contributes to the change process is an influx of energy" (Waddell & Sohal, 1998, p 545)

The act of resisting means employees may be able to express their opposing points of view given that management are willing to listen. Sometimes resisting is better than not resisting as at least actively resisting to change demonstrates a flare of passion from employees. This passion and energy can be utilised by the organization if channelled appropriately and management could build on this to strengthen a culture of participation. Ford et al. (2008) suggest that giving employees space to let their voices be heard can enhance teamwork and cohesion. Moreover, if employees are listened to and are able to participate in the change process, management could win the buy in of the workforce which results in a smoother change implementation.

Whilst management may have some great ideas, they may not always have the best solution. Differing points of view raised by employees through the resisting process may be the better fit solution. These ideas generate ownership for the workforce which may minimize resistance. One of the benefits to involving employees in designing solutions is that it further enhances their skills and abilities in continuous improvement. They also have a chance to craft their concerns to proposals in a skilful way that makes it clear that they can be productive for the organization even while opposing present policies. In those situations, top managers should agree to let the resisters set the agenda and define priorities to be address.

Future avenues of resistance to change

Change in successful organizations is inevitable, and when individuals hear of change the natural reaction is usually perceived and written off as, negative. Change leaders aim to avoid, ignore or eliminate resistance however, this may end in missed opportunities for the organization and the workers. Resistance brings with it an opportunity for the organization to learn new ideas on how to implement and deliver the change, whilst allowing employees to be fully present and engagement in business activity. Resistance encourages passion, drive and energy from the workforce which can be directed towards the new strategic direction whilst boosting an innovative culture. Resistance also creates opportunities for employees to make themselves known, to get involved in decision making and to showcase desired skills, whilst enhancing their career profile. Overall, there is an invested interest for both organizations and workers to use the resistance phase in their favour.

Traditionally resistance is viewed in a negative manner, which is feared by practitioners and academics. Future research must allow for this assumption to change thus, contributing to a new body of literature on the topic. Future avenues of resistance must explore in more detail some of the benefits of resistance mentioned in this paper. Usually, organizational examples and case studies showcase the benefits of positive resistance to that of the organization. However, a fruitful line of enquiry is exploring the impact of positive resistance on the resister involved. There are some examples in the scarce body of literature, however, an in-depth investigation would uncover significant insights into the short- and long-term

impact of positive resistance. In turn, the negative view of resistance will be challenged from multiple perspectives.

References

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