# Building a Foundation for Change: Why So Many Changes Fail and What to Do About It

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A surprisingly high percentage of organizational changes are doomed to fail. According to recent surveys, reengineering efforts have about a 33 percent chance of success, mergers and acquisitions succeed 29 percent of the time, quality improvement efforts achieve their goals half the time, and new software applications hit the mark in less than 20 percent of the cases.

What often goes wrong: Bright people develop a plan that includes a sound business reason for the change. The objectives are clear. The plan includes time lines, budgets and staffing requirements. The plan seems on target. And, the plan is good — as far as it goes. But, it's what is not in the plan that creates problems. What most plans lack are strategies for building support for the change.

According to a survey of Fortune 500 executives, resistance is the primary reason that changes fail in organizations. And yet, we seldom plan ways to transform opposition into support. Face it, resistance is real. No matter how brilliant or needed an idea, resistance will occur. It is a natural reaction to change. It protects people from what they think will harm them. Leaders who close their eyes to resistance are inviting disaster.

There is a better way: Build a foundation for change. Rather than assuming people will automatically love your idea, add strategies to your plan to build support for the change. There are four steps that should be part of every plan: Conduct a Change Readiness Assessment, Get Others Involved, Plan for the Inevitable, Monitor Support.

## Step 1: Conduct a Change Readiness Assessment

A change readiness assessment answers the question, 'Where are we today?' The assessment looks at past practices and the current situation. Here is a short questionnaire that can help you begin that assessment. Ask a cross-section of people in the organization to complete it. Often, your own vantage point only allows you to see a portion of the whole picture: other departments and levels within the organization will give you a more complete view of where things stand.

**1.  History of Change (What's our track record handling change?)**

The past is the best predictor of the future. If your ideas were met with cheers and your path was strewn with rose petals in the past, then it might be reasonable to expect that a new initiative will meet with similar applause. However, if past changes were nothing but headaches — if you had to fight, manipulate, cajole, make back room deals to push your ideas through — then expect much the same this time.

Low scores indicate a strong likelihood that this change will be resisted with great force. You will need to demonstrate repeatedly that you are serious — and that this change is important. People are likely to be very skeptical, you will need to be persistent.

## 2. Direction (Do people throughout the organization understand and accept the direction the company is moving and the values that fuel that vision?)

Low scores could indicate a conflict over values and overall direction. The people who must support the change may not believe they share much common ground with you. This is a serious problem. It almost guarantees that any major change will be resisted. Without shared values and vision, people lack a context for the change.

On the other hand, low scores simply may indicate a communication problem. In some organizations, values and visions remain secret. People don't know where the organization is going. Senior management hangs onto these documents as if they were sacred texts that only they, the high priests, can interpret. This is a communication problem that can easily be resolved by getting the word out.

## 3. Cooperation and Trust (Do people share information and deal with each other openly and with respect?)

Low scores indicate very serious problems. It is difficult, if not impossible, to build support for major change without trust. Since the opposite of trust is fear, a low score almost guarantees strong opposition. When people are afraid, they will either fight or lie low: neither response will give you the commitment you need to be successful.

## 4. Culture (Is this an organization that supports risk taking and change?)

Mid-range to low scores indicate that it may be difficult for people to carry out the changes even if they support you. Your systems and procedures hinder change. You must examine these deeper structural issues.

## 5. Resilience (Can people handle more change?)

People in many organizations are simply worn out by the number of changes and transitions they've been asked to weather in recent years. No matter how worthy the change, their opposition to it may stem from a lack of resilience, and not from some objection to the idea being proposed.

Low to mid-range scores probably indicate that people have lost their capacity to respond to another initiative. Your hallways may look like a cast party from The Night of the Living Dead. Even though workers may see the need for this change, they may have little energy to give to it. Two important questions: Is this change really necessary at this time? If so, how can you support people so that the change can be implemented with the greatest ease?

## 6. Rewards (Do people believe this change will benefit them?)

One well-used truism: What gets rewarded gets done. Unfortunately, its counterpart doesn't get as much attention: What gets punished gets avoided. For example, organizations that say they want teamwork but reward individual achievement, shouldn't be surprised when cooperation falters.

Obviously, low scores indicate strong potential resistance. After all, who would support something they think will harm them? If employees' perceptions are accurate, then you have a difficult challenge: You must find a way to move forward with the change and find ways to make it rewarding for others. If the low scores indicate a misperception, then you must let people know why they are misinformed. Remember, as anxiety increases, our ability to listen diminishes. It is likely that this message will have to be communicated repeatedly (especially if trust is low as well).

7. **Respect, Control, and Saving Face (Will people be able to maintain dignity and self-respect?)**

Low scores probably indicate concern over loss of respect, status or face. You must find ways to make this a situation in which all can win.

Leaders often hope that there is opposition simply because people don't have all the facts. Unfortunately, most resistance to major change is deeper and stems from a fear of loss. Our slick PowerPoint presentations cannot deal with these deeper and more emotional issues. You must engage wary people in conversation. Be open and listen to their concerns.

8. **Impact on Status Quo (How disruptive will this change be to the status quo?)**

Low scores indicate that people view this change as very disruptive and stressful. Get people involved. When people have some control over changes that affect them, they are likely to put up less resistance.

9. **Skill at Managing Change (How adept are leaders at planning and implementing change?)**

The people leading change need to be adept at a number of skills such as:

- creating alignment among diverse interests,
- listening: getting concerns, fears, and interests up on the table,
- articulating a compelling vision (or work with others to create a shared vision),
- anticipating and responding appropriately to resistance,
- communicating: keeping people informed.

If scores are low in this category, consider how you can develop change management skills as you proceed with the change. There is no shortage of books on the market that cover the needed skills. Consider working with mentors, men and women who have a proven track record, to learn their

secrets. Training may be beneficial as well, but choose courses that demand you practice using change management skills.

## What To Do with the Results

High Scores probably indicate that you are in good shape for this change. High scores suggest that your organization knows how to work well with its people. Strong working relationships are the best antidote to resistance. When trust is high, people tend to give us the benefit of the doubt. When trust is low, people read everything as a sign that we are up to our usual dirty tricks.

Mid-range scores carry potential danger. Look into what is behind these scores. For example, mid-range scores on a category such as Cooperation and Trust might indicate a problem that is slowly developing. Take these scores seriously. You have an opportunity to tilt the balance in your favour by addressing these issues. Low scores indicate serious trouble. The greater the number of low scores, the more likely it is that you will face intense resistance. But even a single low score — even if all other scores are high could cause a problem. Treat any low score seriously. Be interested and curious about the reasons behind this low score. Work with people to raise these scores.

By raising low scores, you begin to build stronger relationships with other individuals and groups. This will serve you well in two ways: It will help build support for the current initiative, and it will begin to build alliances that will serve you well in subsequent changes.

The actual scores are less important than the reasons people chose the scores they did. Responses to the questionnaire should act as a springboard for conversation about change and resistance. Conversations should focus on the experiences and feelings that accompany these scores. For example, if the CEO rated everything a seven (high), middle-managers scored in the three to five range, and non-management staff rated everything low, you have the makings of an intriguing conversation. Explore these various points of view without judgment.

Consider the following questions as you examine the results:

- What interests you about the scores?
- Where do you see patterns?
- Where are the points of greatest agreement?
- Where are the points of greatest disagreement?

# Step 2: Get Others Involved

You must get everyone who has a stake in the outcome deeply involved in the change. Those with a stake in the outcome must have an opportunity to explore and influence the goals and/or their part in the implementation of the change. Anything less, and you risk failure or delay.

Change strategies that get people deeply involved tend to do better than those that rely on raw use of power, manipulation, or overriding opposition.

People resist to protect themselves from changes they believe will threaten them. They might fear the change will cost them their job, their status, their ability to work with pride. People seldom resist just to get at you. There are no born resistors. Resistance is always in response to something. It is rare that plans for change include a way to work with natural opposition in a constructive manner. When resistance occurs, leaders often react with surprise or disbelief. Face it: It is rare to see a change that does not generate significant resistance. It goes with the territory. And the more disruptive the change, the stronger the resistance. Just assume resistance will occur and develop a plan for working with it. You may fear that talking about resistance will only invite trouble. You may worry that by talking openly about people's fears and concerns, you will 'fan the flames' of resistance. That's not the case. Applying the principles or touchstones listed below will not create problems; the process will allow you to engage in conversations that can build stronger working relationships and strengthen support for your ideas.

## Using Touchstones To Get People Deeply Involved

The most effective strategies that build support for change rely on a few fundamental touchstones. Most successful strategies, whether they involve ten or a thousand people, should include:

## Ways to Keep Focused

Resistance can make you seem angry, and cause you to lose sight of your original goals. Any strategy should ensure that you are able to keep your goal in mind while paying attention to the concerns of those who have a stake in the outcome. Think of mono-vision contact lenses: one eye focuses far, the other near. The brain instantly adjusts as you shift your focus from near to far. You must be able to do the same when working with people on sensitive issues. You must keep your eyes on the prize and pay attention to peoples' reactions to the change simultaneously. If you focus only on your goal, you will miss mounting resistance. If you focus only on the opposition, you will never know when you have enough support to move ahead.

## Ways to Embrace Resistance

Effective strategies don't attempt to overcome resistance, but to embrace and explore it. Often we speak of overcoming resistance, but that thinking will get us into trouble. If peoples' concerns are

deep-seated, then attempts to overcome or overpower them will only increase the resistance. If you need to be convinced that this is true, consider the last time someone tried to make you do something that you felt went against your self-interests. Even if you did go along with the idea, it was probably out of spite, and the other person got only grudging compliance and not your full commitment to the idea. Perhaps you even waited for a chance to even the score. Approaches that embrace resistance encourage people to express their opposition and get to the root of their concern. These meetings usually are short on presentation and high on conversation. For example, 'Structured Dialogue' is often used as a way to get issues out in the open. The ground rules are quite simple. One person or group speaks while others listen. The listeners ask questions that help them deepen the understanding of the issue. They ask, What are this person's beliefs, assumptions, or values that shaped his or her view of the situation? The listeners are forced to slow down and take in the reasons why the other group acts the way in which it does. When we are open to learning more about another person's world, we begin to understand their view of the situation. Amazing things can happen. Dialogue enables us to humanize each other. It allows us to see common interests, aspirations, and fears — and this is the stuff that allows us to build a firm foundation for change on common ground.

## Ways to Show Respect for Those Who Resist

People tell us the truth when they believe we are interested in them, and when they trust that they can offer their views without reprisal. Effective strategies usually allow everyone to have a voice. Structure meetings to ensure that people are listened to. Provide a way to collect and use people's suggestions. This need not be a difficult thing to achieve, simply ask yourself: If I were in their shoes, how would I want to be treated?

## Ways for You to Stay Relaxed and Centred

Few leaders are willing to open themselves to a deluge of criticism. That's one reason why we may avoid those who resist us. Effective change management strategies establish a safe structure for these exchanges. These meetings are not open forums where anything goes. They usually have a fairly strict agenda and clear ground rules. These structures provide security. As leader, you can relax a bit, knowing that there are rules for engagement.

Whatever strategy you choose, make sure you are comfortable using it. Although it might seem that working with large groups could become chaotic the lynch-mob phenomenon — there are many meeting designs that are highly organized. They provide a structure that allows you to feel safe and a clear agenda lets you know what to expect. Bad things usually don't happen. For example, Future Search is a process by which a cross-section of the organization — up to 70 people — comes together to create a shared vision for the future. The format for Future Search is very clear and followed with a fair degree of diligence. To put you at ease, you'll be glad to know that at no point in this meeting

design are people free to burn the leader in effigy. People discuss the history of the organization, note what has made people proud and disappointed, identify issues of importance to all groups, and develop a shared statement of a desired future.

**Ways to Join with the Resistance**

The leaders seek a common ground that attempts to include the interests of all the groups. There are three questions to keep in mind as you join with the resistance.

- What's in it for me?
- What's in it for you?
- What's in it for us?

This final question, 'What's in it for us?' is critical. It is the search for the common stream that unites most interests. It expands the possible options. When some in Cleveland wanted to build a new baseball stadium, one key figure in Northeast Ohio opposed them. He simply did not think it was a worthy idea. However, he did care about economic development for the city. The planners expanded the frame to accommodate a larger picture by asking themselves: Is there a way we can use this stadium as a magnet for economic development? This blending of both interests takes a potential conflict – Where will limited funds go? – and seeks a way to address most interests.


# Step 3: Plan for the Inevitable

Address things that could go wrong. Devise strategies for dealing with potential pitfalls. Think of these as 'What If?' scenarios.

It's easier to devise a solid approach to a problem before it has surfaced than when it is staring you in the face. 'What If?' scenarios allow you to step back and calmly play with possibilities without the risk. Here are some things to consider:

- If the groups have worked together before, identify times when the groups were in conflict. If the groups are new, ask people to draw on their own experience to identify potential conflicts that could occur during the change. Do not assign blame. The goal is to identify issues that could come up during the current change, not dissect past events.
- Form mixed groups that contain representatives from a cross-section of departments and levels of the organizations involved. Have those groups take on the issues identified in Step 1 and develop strategies to address these problems should they occur. Consider the five touchstones as you develop strategies. Groups should address the following questions:
    - How can we keep our focus on the goal if this issue occurs? **(Maintain Focus)**

- How will we summon the courage to stick with it, even if the going gets extremely tough? **(Maintain Focus)**
- What can we do to ensure mutual respect in the midst of this issue? **(Respect)**
- What can we do to ensure that all the critical issues get out on the table? **(Embrace Resistance)**
- How can we stay relaxed in the midst of this conflict? **(Relax)**
- How can we promote the development of common values? **(Join Resistance)**
- Subgroups report to the full group all questions, comments, and suggested changes. The full group decides which of these strategies it can fully support. By addressing potential resistance before it occurs, you often preempt it. People get the critical issues out on the table and make agreements before anyone feels a need to put up a wall or attack others.

# Step 4: Keep it Alive

Planning for the inevitable should reduce a significant number of problems, but the unexpected will occur. Be prepared. The plan should include the following:

**A Way to Include Those Who Were Inadvertently Left out in the Early Stages.** It is surprising how effective a sincere mea culpa can be, and how infrequently it is used. Create a 'What if?' scenario for the folks you inadvertently leave behind.

**A Way to Engage Those Who Have a Change of Heart.** Often people will agree to a change during the early stages, only to discover that they aren't too wild about the idea later on. While it is easy to get angry at these people, anger will do nothing to build support for your plan. People often change their minds once they see how much the new program will cost in time and resources. Sometimes it takes people awhile to recognize the risks involved. Sometimes reservations don't surface until people are immersed in the details of the change. In other cases, new challenges might cause peoples' priorities to shift midstream. Develop a 'What If?' scenario for this potential problem, as well.

**A Way to Monitor Progress.** Your plan will no doubt include a way to monitor progress with regard to deadlines and budgets. But it is equally important to have a way to monitor whether support for the change is building. Some questions to ask: How will we know that support is building for the plan? What will support look like? What level of commitment will we need at each stage of the project? How will we measure active commitment?

**Finally, Pay Attention.** Most plans for change are linear. A leads to B, followed by C. It all seems so rational and sane. Unfortunately, support and resistance are ruled by intangibles like

enthusiasm, commitment, energy, fear and threat. These emotional issues don't lend themselves to neat A + B + C plans. Be prepared to work with resistance at every stage of planning and implementation. And, be prepared for support that comes as a gift out of the blue. Good things do happen. Seeing clearly; paying attention to what's going on today, is the most important thing you can do.

Attending to these four steps will not only help you build support for this change, but begin to develop stronger working relationships with those who must support you. In other words, the next change should be easier, since you will have already begun to build bridges between departments and with key individuals.

## Reference

Rick Maurer, Beyond the Wall of Resistance (Bard Press, 1996).

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