

The Cycle of Change

Rick Maurer

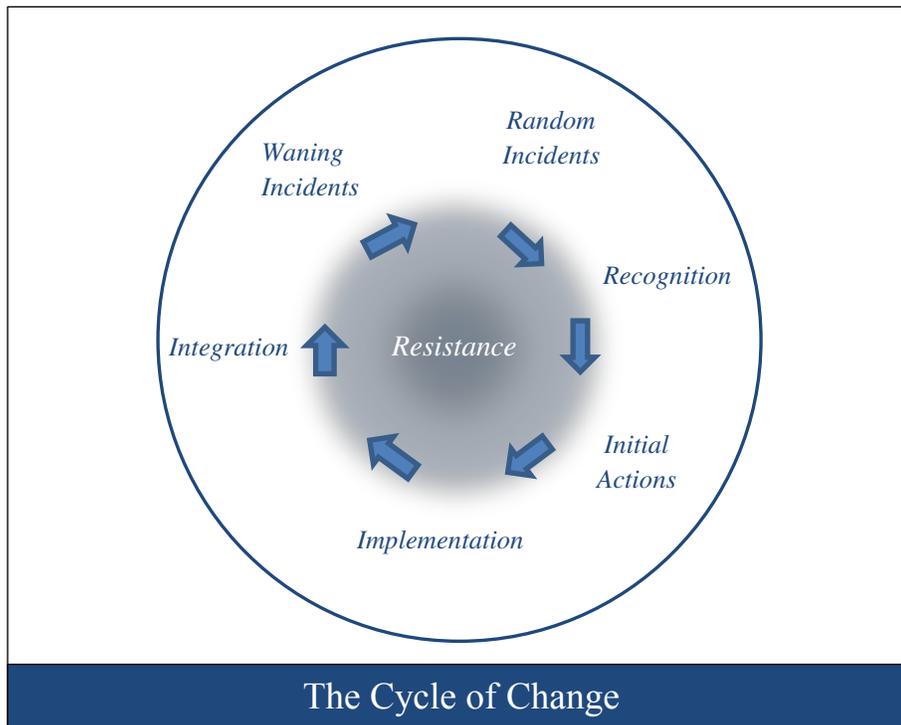


Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
School of Policy Studies
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6

Tel: 613-533-6628
Fax: 613-533-6812
Email: irc@queensu.ca
Visit us at: irc.queensu.ca

The Cycle of Change

Rick Maurer



Resistance to change often appears when people are at different points on the cycle. Take the time to compare the relative positions on the cycle held by everyone involved; it can help you anticipate potential problems and develop the most appropriate strategies.

The richness of the cycle comes in the potential tension between your position on the cycle and others'. I will write as if there were only one other group, so you will be looking at only two points on the cycle — where you are and where they are. Actually, there are probably many different groups, each with its own interests and position on your cycle. To thoroughly understand the situation, you would need to complete this quick assessment with each of the other key individuals or groups. The three most common patterns are these:

- Way Out Ahead
- In It Together
- Stalled

Each has its special challenges and implications. By fully understanding these, you increase the probability that you will build support for the change.

Way Out Ahead

This is the most common situation. You are far ahead of others. Although your vision may not yet be fully formed, it already puts you far from those who don't even recognize a need for change. Your challenge will be to hold onto your vision while working with others wherever they happen to be on the cycle.



As you work, keep in mind the sheer distance between your relative views. These people are unaware of the need for change because they don't see the same picture as you not — because they're out to get you. You are not necessarily brighter than they are; you simply see things differently. Since you have already gone through all the earlier stages and moved far around the circle in your own mind, you run the risk of staying out ahead and trying to force your idea on them. No matter how badly you want to get this idea implemented, you must back up and work with these people.

Ask yourself, Why do we see things differently? Is there anything I can do to help them see the need for change from my point of view? If I simply presented my picture of the possible vision, would this be enough?

Be prepared to learn from them. As you talk with them, you may learn things that change your view of the situation. In other words, your vision may change. You may also learn why they resist your idea. Keep open to exploration.

Implications

If you stay out ahead and avoid working with others who are somewhere else on the cycle, you run the risk of adding bricks to the wall and strengthening resistance to your idea. The most common reason that change falters is an inability to hold a vision in mind while working with those at a different position on the cycle.

If You Must Stay Out Ahead

Staying out ahead is a risky stance. In effect, it suggests that you know best. Even if you are right, it can create tremendous resentment. Before proceeding, ask yourself:

- Why do I feel so strongly about my vision that I can't allow others to influence me?
- Is my vision in the best interests of the people who must support it? Am I sure?
- Even though my vision is set, is there any way I can get others involved in developing strategies?

If you choose to proceed without fully involving others, know that you will probably slog through a tremendous amount of resistance on the way to your goal. You have made a choice to abandon people who could be your allies, and the odds for success are not in your favor.

In It Together

This is a great place to be. The other group and you are beginning to see something. Together you can explore what you see. Gather data. Hold focus-group meetings. Look at the competition. Examine quality reports and customer-service ratings. This is an opportunity for you and the other group to learn together. If you handle it well, you can move in tandem around the cycle.



Bringing together in a single setting all who have an interest in the proposed change has the advantage of ensuring that everyone hears the same thing and that the individuals and groups work together to create a common vision. Here are some questions to ask:

- How can I get the others involved?
- How can I anticipate the resistance that may occur as we move around the cycle?

Implications

By starting everyone at the same place on the cycle, you have an opportunity to build support for the change right from the beginning.

Stalled

You can interpret placement at Stalled in two very different ways.

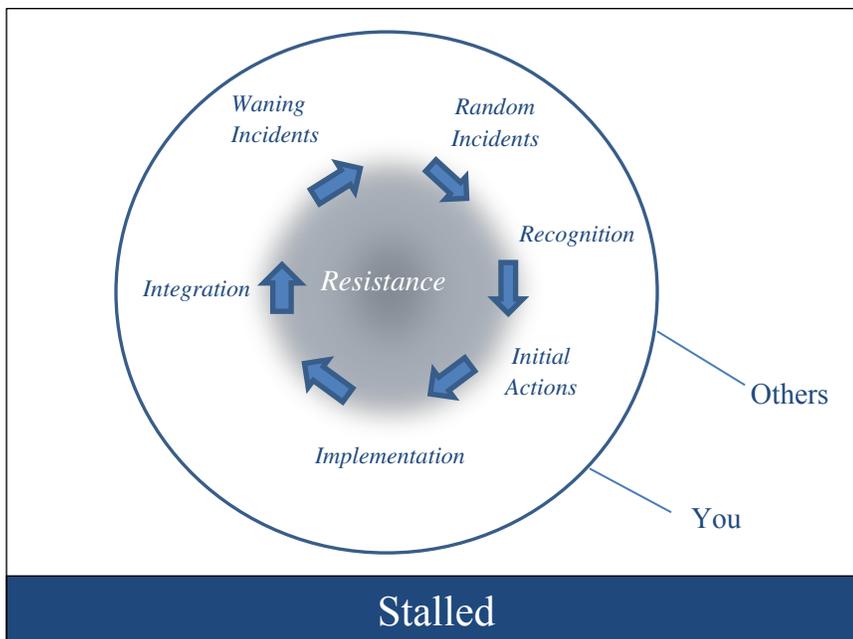
1. **Agreement On Strategies.** You are both at the same place on the cycle, and you see eye-to-eye on the best way to handle the proposed change. This Agreement probably stems from a shared picture of the situation (Random Incidents and Recognition) and a common vision of what Integration would look like.

The resistance that does occur will probably be over details (e.g., speed of implementation, budget, authority, responsibility) rather than any deeper issue. If

you handle this situation well, the resistance will actually provide rich fodder for discussion as you progress through this cycle.

2. **Conflict Over Strategies.** You both recognize the problem facing you, and you may share common goals regarding successful outcomes, but you do not agree on a common approach. For example, you may prefer cost cutting, while the other group sees expanding the revenue base as a way to improve the bottom line. If you see a conflict over strategies, consider the following possibilities:

- Resistance is likely to be over means rather than ends. Your preferred strategy may be wildly disruptive to the other group. Look for turf and power issues. What impact will the change have on the lives of those affected? Who wins and who loses?
- Keep reminding yourself and the others about the reason you are considering the change and what your goals are. This will help you keep things in perspective when you are immersed in minutiae such as trying to decide who gets a corner office.



Implications

If the differences over strategies are deep and you fail to keep channels of communication open, resistance could intensify. However, since everyone agrees on the need for a change, this should not be a major problem.

Using The Cycle

Identifying the other groups' placement on the cycle relative to yours is just the beginning. To use this framework for full effect, consider the following dynamics and nuances.

Each Stage of the Cycle Has Its Day

If you move too fast, you will encounter resistance. The arrow should move clockwise around the cycle. When resistance occurs, the arrow leaves its orbit and falls toward the center of the circle.

Resistance will stop or hinder progress, divert your forward motion. Like a wrong turn on the highway, the diversion can take you miles off course. The more you disregard the dynamics of the cycle, the further people move into resistance.

Imagine this scenario. Management suddenly recognizes that the organization needs to reengineer the way it does business. Since a competitor introduced business-process reengineering with great success, management buys a one-size-fits-all process from Uncle Ed's Discount Consulting Warehouse and rolls it out a week later going quickly from Recognition to Implementation.

Of course, staff are not at the same place on the cycle. They haven't heard about any problems that need to be engineered, much less reengineered. Before staff even recognize that there is a problem, they are told to Implement this new process.

Since staff haven't seen the business reports, and tend to distrust management's interpretation of events, people are skeptical of this new idea. They believe that if they drag their feet or simply ignore management, this fad will pass like all the others before it. The harder management pushes to implement quickly, the further everyone digs in.

Always Ask, Am I Moving Too Fast?

If you take action now, will some group be left behind? if so, slow down. Implementation can come only when those whose support you need buy into the idea. Implementation should not occur until the self-interests of most parties are addressed so people can come together to create a new way of working.

Many new programs stall because key people who have a stake in the outcome are left out of the loop. All (or at least most) of the stakeholders must be brought into the planning and implementation process or you run a strong risk of never achieving full Integration.

Who Are the Players?

It is important to identify all the people who have a stake in the change. Too often we limit this list to the usual suspects and forget key players and groups. When in doubt, think big. If you're inside a large organization consider the following individuals and groups. You may not need them all, but at least consider each before deciding who needs to be part of the planning.

- The chairman
- The board
- The chief executive officer
- The chief financial officer
- The chief operating officer
- Other executives and bosses
- External customers
- External suppliers
- Peers within your department
- Peers in other departments
- Your staff
- Internal customers (those who depend
- Internal suppliers (those you must depend on)

Anything Can Interrupt the Cycle

Stuff happens. Imagine that your merger is just beginning to take root when contract negotiations with the union begin at the newly acquired plant. Tension builds between management and staff. No matter how effective the process has been to date, the tension is likely to slow or stop progress.

If you push ahead, you will almost certainly force a turn into resistance. Remember, anything can disrupt the cycle — news in the business press about a crisis in your industry, rumors of downsizing, someone on your team saying something so stupid that it ignites passions in the other groups

Back up and explore ways to build common ground. You might ask everyone involved, Are there ways we can continue in spite of the tension building within the organization? If the answer is positive, work with all stakeholders to create workable strategies.

If tensions are so high that progress can't be made, back off, and wait out the storm. Once the air clears, back up to Recognition and explore the process again. Do not attempt to pick up where you left off. It may seem that things are the way they were before the storm, but the air is different, conditions have changed. To ignore this change invites resistance.

Celebrate Resistance

When people resist, be thankful. Even if you hate what they have to say, these people have important things to tell you. Do whatever it takes to truly hear the reasons why people don't want to move ahead. Be curious and listen without judgment. Ask questions that help you plumb the depths. Don't punish those who tell the truth. Be thankful that someone had the courage to tell the emperor that he was dressed improperly for the parade.

Usually I am delighted to see resistance surface in meetings with clients. It's a sign of life. Once resistance is out in the open we can have a dialogue. But as long as people hold back, talk will be superficial and meaningless.

Avoid Hoopla

Sometimes it is tempting to believe that banners, speeches, buttons, and geegaws trumpeting the new program will seduce people into signing on. The din of the band may be so loud that management may miss the fact that nobody else has joined the parade. These hollow celebrations may create a false belief that you are further along the cycle than you really are.

Don't Hold Onto a Dying Program

Say a prayer, hold a funeral, then move on. Allow the cycle to run its course. Never expect to arrive. Implementation and Integration are merely stops on the cycle. Just when everything seems to be working fine, someone will ask, 'So what's next?' It would be easy to despair. However, the 'What's next?' question indicates that the cycle is working and that it's time to take the change to another level.

Reference

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

* This article was edited and reproduced by permission of Rick Maurer.



Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6
irc.queensu.ca