

Managing Change & Technology

The Light Version... Vol 4, #1
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*To Embrace the Future,
Let go of the Past
PdJ*

WE DON'T RESIST CHANGE

A reasoned re-statement of the obvious

What can we learn...

When our actions contradict our beliefs?

"Contrary to everything we think we know about the complicated issue of change management, people do not resist change." Each time I make this statement, I raise my shields to protect myself from a storm of protest, objections and rotten fruit thrown by both audience and clients.

I expect this response because the idea, "people resist change" is firmly ingrained in our management belief system and in every best seller on change management. Despite the initial fierce "resistance" to an obviously bizarre idea, it takes only a few questions to drastically change people's minds.

I can already sense that some readers are smiling to themselves in the belief that I've just contradicted myself. "If people don't resist change, why are they throwing produce?"

No - I haven't contradicted myself. Read on and all will become clear. To shake anyone's belief regarding "resistance to change", we need only present them with a glaring contradiction between their stated beliefs and their own behaviour.

What are the largest, most dramatic changes which occur in our lives? (Not including death, over which we have little control.) Most people agree that getting married and then having children are two possible answers. Both of these are life changing events of gargantuan proportions.

If these two events, marriage and children, are indeed monstrous change events, *and* if it is *also* true that "people resist change", then why do most people get married and have kids – voluntarily. I've not seen too many shotgun marriages in my lifetime.

If it were true that we resist change - then we would not voluntarily get married or have children. Yet we do these things. What's going on? These aren't the only examples of readily accepted/embraced change...

If it is true that we resist change, then why do we:

Seek to advance our careers?

Learn to drive a car?

Learn a new language or musical instrument?

Go someplace different for our next vacation?

Listen to new music?

We could continue this list to cover most human activities...

What can we learn...

When we stumble onto a contradiction?

All of these actions and voluntary decisions, directly and unarguably - if we are honest with ourselves - shatter the "we resist change" myth.

We don't resist change; we do however resist *being changed*.

If we can find fault with the above observation, it is because it sounds far too simplistic. The answer to all change management problems in our organizations, cannot possibly be that simple. Instead we tend to believe that... *The solution to change management problems must be very complicated, involved, and especially, costly! You cannot summarize it into ten little words!*

Fortunately or unfortunately, take your pick, the harsh reality *is* that we can trace all change management issues, large and small, back to that simple observation. Are the people involved, being forced to change? Or have they themselves decided a change is necessary to overcome a recognized problem? At the very least, do they have enough information to decide for themselves, that the change being ~~forced~~ implemented is an appropriate response to a known problem?

Here's another approach to this issue. Think back to the absolute worst change management experience you've ever lived through.

There were at least two groups, possibly more, involved in your fondly remembered debacle. At least one group, possibly management, was pushing for the change. The other group, likely staff, resisted it in every way they could.

Ignore the resisters; focus only on those who were pushing for the change. Why weren't *they* resisting it? That question often generates a strange look and an exasperated reply, "Because! They **wanted** the change you fool!" which then begs the question... why did they want the change?

This isn't a frivolous question. The answer to this seemingly silly question "Why does someone want a specific change?" contains the answer to the infinitely more important question "How do we avoid resistance to change?"

In your remembered catastrophic change, ask yourself... why weren't those pushing for the change - resisting it instead??? If you continue this line of questioning long enough, you will inevitably arrive at the following line of reasoning.

Those pushing for the change became aware of something which threatened the viability of the existing Status Quo. If they did nothing different in response to this perceived threat, the consequences would be unacceptable. As a response to this threat, they came up with a solution which they believed would solve the problem. This became the change they believed in and were trying to implement.

To bring change about, without force or resistance, we must involve as many people as possible in the above thought process. Here's another simple observation. We do not resist the change we choose to create ourselves.

If it happens that we cannot involve everyone in the decision making process, then at the very least this decision making process must be transparent to everyone. As a secondary choice, this does not work as well as direct involvement, but it succeeds far more than attempting to merely force people to change.



*Today the real test of power
is not the capacity to make war
but the capacity to prevent it.*



Anne O'Hare McCormick

Offered in support of the troops – not the war.

MC&T IS PUBLISHED WHENEVER I CAN GET TO IT...
AND HAVE SOMETHING USEFUL TO SAY... BY:

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OBSERVATIONS AND TAUTOLOGIES

*Or... just because it's obvious, doesn't mean it's useless
(or... making sure we are acting on what we know to be true)*

1. Finding Change Difficult \neq Resistance to Change

It takes time to learn how to do something new. The beginning stages of any new endeavour are frustrating, sometimes painful, and often even deadly. Depending on whether you're learning to play golf, ride a bike, or drive a car.

If someone is afraid of that transition period, and even goes to great lengths to avoid it, then it does not necessarily follow that they are resisting the idea of golfing, cycling or driving. They are resisting the 'pain' of getting there, not the notion of achieving the final skill.

This is a subtle distinction, but it is an important one if it is our responsibility to bring about Change. If we know that people are afraid of the *difficulty* of the transition period, and *not* the Change itself, then we can shift our focus from communicating "Why the Change is necessary", to working on "Minimizing the pain of acquiring the necessary skills".

eg. Someone who has decided they want to play the Violin is more likely to achieve that goal with a good teacher, than if they rely only on reading a book on playing the Violin.

Why? Because a teacher is more capable of transferring the necessary skills, than is written text.

eg. Someone who is scared of becoming a manager, but wants to become a manager, can benefit greatly by attending a course for new managers, instead of being appointed to the role and left to fend for themselves.

Why? Because being taught what to do, is far easier, safer and less prone to failure than having to learn everything through trial and error.

eg. A department destined to significantly change their role and responsibility, is far more likely to embrace that new role if a structure is put in place to support them during the transition.

Why? The more we can reduce their fear of not being able to acquire new skills, the more they can concentrate on learning and not on their contingency plan of updating their resume.

2. People don't like being told what to do

Human Beings are perverse. If you tell someone to do something, there's a good chance they'll choose to do the exact opposite. There's even a name for the strategy that seeks to capitalize on this peculiar behaviour pattern. It's called "Reverse Psychology", and it's considered a cheap, manipulative, management technique. Be that as it may, it's also effective. (Especially with teenagers!)

Why does it work? Because, (more 'obviousness' here... piled high and deep)... we don't like being told what to do.

Why this is so, is irrelevant, the fact remains most of us don't like being told what to do... Those of us responsible for implementing Change should have this tattooed on the palms of our hands... so that every time we reach up to pull our hair out in frustration, we're reminded of the real reason they're resisting...

People don't like being told what to do.

p.s. So stop telling them...

3. We don't resist Change which we initiate

It is tempting to ignore this as being obviously far too obvious. It is one of those observations which is so obviously true that our first response is to snarl... 'So What!?' Yet, most of our Change problems are generated when we deliberately ignore this grade school level observation.

eg. I extracted this from a very recent posting on an Internet discussion list. *I've modified the details to protect those involved.*

Query:

We're a Human Resource department in a large organization. Our mandate is to **support our managers** in the hiring process. A reduction in budget has caused us to cut back on certain services. We used to do reference checks on all candidates and then present back to the managers a suggested short list. **We've decided** to reduce our workload by doing these reference checks at the end of the interview process after the managers have reduced their candidates to a potential short list. We're encountering tremendous resistance to this Change, can anyone help us?

Observation:

Finding a solution to a Change problem, after people have *already* dug their heels in, is incredibly difficult, sometimes impossible. When we act in a manner that causes people to dig in their heels then we are deliberately creating intractable problems for ourselves.

Alternative Strategy:

Asking for Management's involvement, and help, in finding solutions to HR's reduced capability to provide the same service levels, would have placed Management in control of the solution.

Is there any doubt that they would have come up with a solution to HR's problem? It might not have been the solution that HR chose in the above case study. What matters is that together, HR and management could have created a joint solution.

Yes! The reduced budget forces a Change, but getting Management to initiate the specific solution to the problem is the trick/strategy/technique/manipulation necessary to avoid the resistance to the required Change.

And yes! The process of involving the target audience does take time. On occasion it takes a LOT of time. But in exchange for that investment in time and energy, we usually achieve a solution acceptable to all parties.

4. Forced Change that we cannot resist... we must, can, and do cope with.

There are changes - outside our sphere of control and influence - which place us in situations where there is no alternative but to assimilate the change and carry on as best we can. Resisting these unique types of changes is futile.

Some which come to mind are death, mergers, being fired, living in a recession etc. etc. The only long term response to these situations is to move forward as best we can, and as quickly as possible... but being human means we will always require some time to assimilate this type of change. The process by which we learn to cope is outlined neatly by the Kubler-Ross Grief Cycle.

- ie. **D**enial – We don't believe that it has occurred and seek confirmation.
- A**nger – Why did it happen to us!?
- B**argaining – Can we negotiate our way out of this situation?
- D**epression – The realization that this really has happened and is unavoidable.
- A**cceptance – We decide to go forward and we find we can, do, and must cope.

This process of assimilation is unavoidable, and yet it does provide opportunities where appropriate assistance makes for an easier transition.

5. Change Hurts

Simple and to the point. Understand it and we call ourselves "Inflictors of Change" and focus on the human aspect of Change. Ignore it, and we label ourselves "Change Agents" and concentrate on getting the Change implemented. One is slow and sure, the other fast and furious. Take your pick.

BIG WORLD CHANGE

*There are bigger changes than those we see
in the safety of the corporate world,
yet the rules and consequences are the same...
just writ larger.*

Gardeners know that pushing a heavy lawnmower over an ugly nasty weed, week after dreary week, is only an excuse for exercise under the hot sun. It isn't effective at removing the weed and besides, the roots gain time to grow strong and deep. If you really want to waste that weed - understanding why it is there in the first place, how it grows and what nurtures it, are important bits of information.

Building the Future, Change in other words, is all about weed removal. What are the obstacles between what we desire to achieve and what we already have? How do we overcome them without making the obstacles stronger in the process?

Stronger? Unfortunately that's what typically happens when we try to push something out of our way, it pushes back... and the harder we push – the more resistance we encounter.


Try it... ask someone to put their hand up as if they're about to make the oath of allegiance. Place your hand against theirs and tell them you're going to push. What are they doing? They're pushing back. Now push harder and you'll notice they'll trade you grunt for groan until you stop pushing. Ask them why and the answer you'll receive is "If I didn't push back, I'd fall over" or they'll mumble something about pushing back is "instinctive". What they're really saying is they are protecting their territory. It is human nature to push back when pushed.

Of course we might be so 'strong' that resistance is truly futile. I'm 6'2" and mean looking. I could easily push children over - no matter how hard they tried to stop me. Unfortunately for us, not every obstacle is like a little child. Some are more complex in their nature.

To build a future is to bring about societal change. If there is anyone with a vested interest in the existing Status Quo, then they will - it's their duty - resist that future with tooth and nail. They'll do this until they decide, because of either reason or force, that it is time to change.

Of the two, "reason" is the tool of choice, and "force" only works when the recipient believes they have no choice but to change. i.e. they cannot afford the consequence of not changing.

"Force" is often the 'easy' solution. *If they don't change, fire them!* That threat is often more than enough to get someone to use a new accounting system, although it doesn't do much to build either morale or company loyalty.



Of course financial “force” is also effective. Raising the cost of driving a car into a downtown area by raising parking fees via a 1000% tax, is a rather effective form of force. Traffic congestion would disappear overnight if it cost \$300 to park the car.

The problem with “force” as a solution is that it is based on two curious assumptions:

a) There is a specific target for the application of the force, whether it is social, economic or even military might.

If you cannot identify each person in the “target” population, then you can’t apply the necessary force. In the parking example, everyone who wants to park downtown IS the target – we get them when they park.

b) That there **IS** an unacceptable consequence to not changing.

The ultimate use of force is the threat of death, or the threat of a loved one’s death.

Which leads us to two final observations:

The effectiveness of force is active only as long as it remains a threat. If I have only one person I care about, and you kill that person, then you have lost your hold on me. Unless of course you threaten me... this leads to the other observation.

What if the threat of personal death means nothing to me? What if death is one of my accepted responses to being pushed? How effective is the threat of death if my primary weapon against you is a suicide attack?

And... what if the use of force only serves to spawn the very obstacle it was trying to eradicate?

*Editor's note:

This is the first time ever, that MC&T has approached a real world political event in even a superficial manner. Why this time? Because this journal is about "Change" and therefore the lessons and observations we explore are applicable to all the Changes going on around us. And, unfortunately, there's a lot going on around us.

In this issue I've stepped to the fringe, and cautiously leaned over the boundaries to which I've restricted past discussions. Perhaps by doing so, we can remind ourselves that the Rules of Change are applicable to all Human endeavours, that if we ignore these rules we are accepting potentially negative consequences.

To those involved directly, or indirectly in the current conflicts, I wish you and yours peace and safety.

Peter de Jager
April 2003

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Frequent Change Seminars in the UK, Scotland & Eire

I've landed several repeat clients in the UK, so I get back there on a fairly frequent basis. The next month long trip will be September 2003.

If you wish to schedule an in-house seminar, presentation or consulting assignment; or even express a desire to get together for lunch in the UK around that time, please contact me, as soon as possible, to make suitable arrangements.

↕ ↕ ↕ Synergy is found in the Gaps ↕ ↕ ↕

If you have a gap in your offerings to clients,
or know of a gap where Change expertise would be useful,
then I look forward to hearing from you.

SERVICES & PRODUCTS

I'm primarily a speaker/consultant on issues relating to Change and the Future. You can contact me via e-mail at pdejager@technobility.com or call me at 1-905-792-8706 to discuss how I might be of service to your organization.

My speaking topics fall under the umbrella of Change, Technology and the Future. Here are some sample titles.

Presentations: Managing the Impact of Change...

Basically everything I talk about in this journal are topics I consult and speak about. Let's discuss how I might be of service to you. If I can't help you, I know someone who can.

Workshops:

The Change Management workshops are highly interactive, challenging and provocative.

Why attend or initiate a Workshop?

- If you want to avoid unnecessary Change Resistance in any Change project

- If you want to explore how to erode existing resistance

- If you want to tailor a Change Workshop to speed a specific Change

The benefit?

It is generally accepted that projects which fail, fail more because of people issues than from any technical difficulties.

It is also generally accepted that Change Management is difficult.

However, it isn't as difficult as we believe, and this seminar presents the fundamental concepts behind rational, reality based Change Management Techniques.

Consulting:

I work with clients on both long and short assignments; as either advisor, Change Project manager or on a retainer basis to increase Change Management skills throughout your organization.

That's it for this issue... see you when next there's something worth saying.

Peace

Peter de Jager