

Is resistance to  
change negative or  
positive?



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‘ Critically discuss whether resistance to change should be seen as negative or positive/productive’.

## INTRODUCTION

Change is essential in every aspect and stage of life. Change happens and is essential in our schools, homes, workplaces and every other aspect of our life change can be advantageous or retrogressive and either way it can be useful. If it is advantageous, life goes on with an enriched and progressive aspect; if it's not, lessons will be learnt on how to introduce and implement the change next time. Change is inevitable and sometimes uncontrollable and there are many reasons that will call for a particular form of change. Internal and external factors can put enough pressures on managers to introduce change in their workplaces even when they know the change might not be welcomed or easy to introduce and implement. The ever-changing nature of external factors like the economy, politics, social factors, technology and the environment can trigger change. Internal factors such as absenteeism, low productivity, operational and strategic factors and even strikes can also raise the need for change in our organisations and workplaces. Sometimes it is a mixture of both internal and external that can trigger the need for change. Usually the internal factors are easier to manage since they are within the control of managers, but companies have to adapt to the external factors and introduce change that are in line with the direction of the external factors. Change is usually introduced when an organization deems it necessary to move from its current state to a more desirable state or when managers feel organizational goals are not been met and they think the organization needs a certain amendment in its policies

and other aspects. Change can bring about more growth opportunities, new skills sets especially for employees and even an increased competitive advantage if it is implemented successfully and properly.

Change can be useful and will need to be implemented but for the implementation to be a success it will depend on the reaction of those who are affected by the change. . Even when people become aware of the fact that a particular form of change is needed, the thought of transitioning from their current state which is usually comfortable to a new unknown state is quite uncomfortable and strange hence there comes a time especially in our workplaces when change is not always welcome and is difficult to implement due to the fact that the people who will be affected by change are resisting it or are finding it hard to adapt to the change.

In this essay I will discuss whether resistance to change should be seen as negative or positive/productive. I will highlight both the negatives and positives of resistance to change and how this affects the implementation of the change.

## MAIN BODY

### Section one

In this section I will talk about what change is and why it is needed.

Change is an inevitable process that pushes us out of our comfort zones and propels us into outcomes that we usually have no control over. Change moulds us and helps us to have new perspectives about things and teaches us to adapt to things. Change is said to be inevitable because as time goes

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on the things that used to work in previous times usually tend to fail to work or become obsolete in recent times. Change is important even when its uncomfortable at first.

The impact of change is measured by those who are affected by it and how they react to the change can determine whether the change is fully welcomed and successfully implemented or not. As cited in D'Ortenzio (2012), according to Kanter (1982; p. 279): “ *Change involves the crystallisation of new possibilities (new policies, new behaviours, new patterns, new methodologies, new products or new market ideas) based on the reconceptualised patterns in the institution. The architecture of change involves the design and construction of new patterns, or the reconceptualisation of old ones, to make new, and hopefully more productive actions possible*”. (p. 51).

This indicates that change is an intense process and that is why most people and organizations find it uncomfortable and often try to avoid it or resist it even when in the long run it is productive.

Kanter, Stein and Jick (1992) also cited in D'Ortenzio (2012); considered change to be ‘ *the shift in behaviour of the whole organisation*’.

Change affects everyone; from employees to managers and most employees especially will not be ready to accept change unless they have a good reason to do so and this is why incentives should be put in place to make change look more attractive and favourable so that people will not be intimidated by the transition and the responsibilities that comes with it.

As cited in Bovey H & Hede A, (2001); “ *Therefore, in order to successfully lead an organization through major change it is important for management to balance both human and organization needs*”. (Spiker and Lesser, 1995; Ackerman, 1986).

Change will not be successfully implemented if it is of use to only an aspect of an organization and not the organization as a whole and all its components. Change affects everyone in an organization be it directly or indirectly and therefore all components of an organization should be taken into consideration before any change is introduced or implemented.

Naturally people are usually reluctant to leave the old and move to new things and that is one of the reasons why change can be an uncertain and even scary journey since it is mostly a shift from familiarity and certainty to unforeseeable, vague and sometimes even risky territories of growth. When employees are uncertain about the future of any proposed change it is only natural for them to fight against it or resist it. Hence management should not only think about the good of the organization when introducing any form of change; but should rather include and make provisions that will cater for the wellbeing of employees as well. When employees feel any form of proposed change also considers their interests they will be more receptive of it and be less prone to fight against it.

But even though change is uncomfortable as mentioned earlier, it is still necessary especially for growth. Change is needed since it opens the gateway to new opportunities and skills that organizations and employees were not aware that they could have. Other advantages that come with

change can be financial benefits, increased learning, reaching potential standards, achieving both personal and organisational goals, good interpersonal relationships among employees and managers and even an increased competitive advantage. Introduction of change can even serve as a way for employees to become more involved in organizational processes that they were unfamiliar with before the change was introduced. Change can also provide a new perspective and way of doing things which might end up as more productive than the usual manner of doing things.

## Section 2

In this section, I will highlight what resistance to change is, why it occurs and why it is seen as negative.

As cited in Nudzor P, et al (2017);

“ behaviour which is intended to protect an individual from the effects of real or imagined change” (Alvin Zander, cited in Dent & Goldberg, 1999: 34).

resistance is seen as negative because it is misinterpreted instead of being understood.

As cited in Dianne Waddell, Amrik S. Sohal, (1998),

Hultman (1979) writes that “ Unfortunately, when the word resistance is mentioned, we tend to ascribe negative connotations to it. This is a misconception. There are many times when resistance is the most effective response available.” (p. 54).

For many years, resistance has been seen as an antagonist to change and hence seen as negative. Due to this, there is this notion that resistance has to be overcome in order for change to be successful. This is evident in Schien 1988 quote about resistance as cited in Waddell A. & Sohal S. (1998);

“ Resistance is often viewed by managers as the enemy of change, the foe which must be overcome if a change effort is to be successful”. (Schein, 1988, p. 243).

Most managers fight resistance instead of trying to understand it or using it to their advantage due to the preconceived notion that any change process that is met with little or no resistance is the best form of change even though this is not always the case. Hence managers tend to fight resistance with force without trying to understand it forgetting that People might just accept change whether good or bad just because usually acceptance is better than fighting and questioning especially when the future is uncertain.

Resistance is usually seen as negative because it hinders the progress of change. As cited in Waddell A. & Sohal S. (1998),

Ansoff (1988) defines resistance as “ a multifaceted phenomenon, which introduces unanticipated delays, costs and instabilities into the process of a strategic change”. (p. 207).

Resistance usually comes with a lot of issues and due to this managers have a hard time implementing and introducing change since they will be fighting the issues instead of focusing on the introduction of change. This makes the whole process very tedious and difficult. One thing that managers fail to

recognize when it comes to resistance is the fact it is natural for people to reject what they do not understand or fear.

As cited in Bovey H. & Hede A., (2001);

Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) argue that “ organizational change often meets some form of human resistance and that individuals react to change in different ways. When implementing change, management needs to be aware of how human processes such as irrational ideas and emotion may influence an individual’s behaviour towards that change”. (p. 380-381)

the resistance to change occurs because there are usually no examples of the change that is being introduced that employees can look up to. Due to this employees may feel they lack the competence, understanding and the ability to actually welcome the change and incorporate it in their organizational lives hence the resistance. Hence resistance is usually out of fear of uncertainty, lack of understanding and skepticism. Employees also resist change because they feel that the things that attracted them to the job are being changed and due to this they may lose their work identity or self worth. The resistance against the change will then start because employees will fight to keep their comfortable daily routines instead of accepting new and probably difficult routines they will have a hard time adapting to and Since the change is usually a huge shift from the familiar to the unfamiliar, employees are likely to see it as a detriment to their interests. As cited in Collinson (2003),

Kondo (1990) concludes that “ words like “ resistance” and “ accommodation” truly seem inadequate, for apparent resistance is

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constantly mitigated by collusion and compromise at different levels of consciousness, just as accommodation may have unexpectedly subversive effects” (p. 299).

People will definitely accommodate their current state since they are already used to it and will more or less resist any shift in their current state of affairs.

Resistance also comes up when people feel they are already struggling with their workload and are definitely not looking forward to more work and responsibilities. If this is the case, employees will resist any proposed change since change comes with new responsibilities.

### Section 3

In this section, I will talk about how resistance can be positive and how it can influence the smooth transition of change instead of hindering its progress. I will also critically discuss whether it should be seen as negative or positive.

As mentioned earlier, resistance is seen as negative since it is said to hinder the progress of change. As humans we are always scared to fail and that is why managers fight against resistance so hard because they see it as a sign of failure and lack of control. But fortunately this is not always the case. The problem is managers are yet to understand how to use resistance to their advantage instead of seeing it as a problem. Managers have to understand that sometimes it is not the change itself that employees resist, rather it is the unfamiliarity and uncertainties that come with the change that is fought against. As cited in Waddell A. & Sohal S. (1998),

*“ Resistance to a change is not the fundamental problem to be solved. Rather, any resistance is usually a symptom of more basic problems underlying the particular situation. Resistance can [therefore] serve as a warning signal directing the timing of technological changes” (Judson, 1966, p. 69).*

Understanding resistance on a deeper level can actually give managers the chance to identify problems that were unnoticed initially and find ways to deal with them before introducing any form of change. Apart from resistance serving as a warning signal to underlying problematic issues, it can also encourage the search for solutions to conflicting interests. Once managers are able to identify the actual issues that are causing the resistance, they will be able to find solutions that will help reduce the resistance or even find ways to incorporate the resistance as an agent of motivation. Resistance can also serve as a check on unnecessary and unhelpful ideas that are being introduced as a form of change. Sometimes the kind of change that is being introduced in an organization is just for the benefit of a select group of people and not for all. At other times the change being introduced has not been thought through thoroughly but is just an act of copying blindly. The level of resistance that meets change can help managers rethink their decision. As cited in Dianne Waddell, Amrik S. Sohal, (1998),

*“ Resistance is what keeps us from attaching ourselves to every boneheaded idea that comes along” (Maurer, 1996 p. 57).*

As illustrated above, not all ideas of change are sensible or suitable and it needs a high level of resistance especially from third parties in order to realise it. Introducers of change may not realise how unproductive some forms of change actually are until they are resisted against. Hence, resistance can serve as a guide that determines whether particular form of change is feasible or necessary.

As to whether resistance is negative or positive will depend on how the kind of change being introduced and whether or not it is beneficial to only the introducers of change or beneficial to all those affected by the change. It is not every change that is met with little resistance that is good and it is not every change that is met with a higher level of resistance that is bad. It all boils down to how well the change is understood and how feasible and productive it is. Even if a particular form of change is good it can still be met with high resistance if it is misunderstood. What managers should understand when it comes to resistance is it can be negative or positive depending on how well it is handled. Managers should learn to involve employees and all those affected by change

## Conclusion

Resistance to change can be both negative and positive but at the end of the day it is the reaction to the resistance and how it is handled and managed that will determine whether it will hinder the progress of change or will actually promote change. It cannot be totally be determined whether resistance will always be negative or positive in every situation; the only thing that can be changed is our attitude towards it and our decision to

handle it in a way that works in our favour or use it as a guide to solve the problems that are being resisted. Constructive use of resistance goes a long way in a positive direction than forcibly fighting it.

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