

Overcoming resistance to change

George Tomlin, Principal Consultant



They say people don't like change. If you think about it that's not entirely true – as individuals we move house, change jobs, even change our hairstyles. But when it comes to organisational change and business transformation, overcoming resistance to change can feel like the hardest part of the journey for everyone involved.

In this Expert Series, Principal Consultant George Tomlin shares his views on why people resist change in the workplace and why it's important to plan for resistance from the outset.

People resist change for different reasons

Employees generally don't come to work to be difficult and to sabotage your change programme! Yet to some change managers it can feel like that. When you're leading a transformation or change programme, it's easy to forget that you are in control of making that change happen whereas other employees may feel the opposite.

Change means learning something new. If someone is good at their job, and praised for doing it the current way, it can feel unfair to be asked to change. They might have designed the way their role works day to day, and that might be a big part of why they enjoy it. Understanding that and giving them a voice in how the change might happen can go a long way to getting these types of people on board.

Change takes time. In so many companies, employees are flat out day-to-day and don't have the luxury of time or headspace to think about what the change means for them. So even if the change is for their direct benefit (perhaps streamlining or automating their workload to give them more time to do more fulfilling work) it often feels like giving them more work initially and making their job harder. Too many organisations forget this. Planning time for people to learn and adopt how to work differently is critical.

Imagining the change is different from doing it. Imagine you drive in the UK with a right-hand drive car on the left-hand side of the road. You drive to work every day and it's second nature. Then someone tells you that from next Monday you're going to get in the left-hand side and drive on the right-hand side of the road. You can imagine what might be different, and if given some space to do so, imagine what that might feel like. But really, you only understand what is challenging about it, and what you personally will need to adapt about the way you drive, once you're in the new driving seat. Allowing time for hands-on training (not just watching demos) can be a helpful first step but making sure that people have support for the first few days of doing it for real is the best way to increase the speed of adoption and land the change successfully.

Company culture and the type of change play a part

Whilst regulation can add an extra dimension to a change programme, highly regulated industries like Pharmaceuticals may have cultures that are easier to change because employees are used to following rules and changing processes for compliance reasons. They may also hire people who are not looking for the freedom to self-determine what they do. On the other hand, companies that are informally managed – where people are hired for entrepreneurial flair – are often the most resistant to change, unless those entrepreneurs are in the driving seat.

Another dimension that affects the level of resistance to change is the size and scale of the change. If you are trying to get people to switch from one IT system to another it can be much easier than trying to automate what has thus far been a manual process. In the latter example people will probably feel more like they are relinquishing control of their work, than in the former.

Perhaps the biggest dimension is the number of different stakeholders and especially those outside of your business – either suppliers or customers.

Changing the way customers do business with you presents challenges on another level compared to managing internal stakeholders. The variety of attitudes and acceptance of change will be even greater within your customer base and the cost of getting it wrong could also be significantly higher! The same principles of overcoming resistance to change still apply but will require a greater degree of planning and preparation to deliver successfully. Consider the impact of moving all your customers from telephone ordering to doing everything online. It's not just a major change within the company to implement a new set of technology and ways of working, the impact on customers is also significant and needs to be well thought through and planned for.

Expect resistance and plan for it upfront

A good manager will know the strengths of their people, and the types of characters they have in their team. They will need to have strong emotional intelligence and a radar for other people's worries as they go through the change process.

Knowing what types of resistance to expect from whom, is really valuable from the outset and it can often be helpful to target people who will be strong resistors for early engagement and make them your champions for change.

Communication is of course key – telling people what's coming early and having regular updates of progress and also what's not gone well.

Getting people to make changes for themselves is much easier than mandating it. Wherever you can, take the role of the driving instructor – sitting with someone at their desk and talking them through it whilst letting them drive is much better than you demonstrating.

If there really isn't time to do that, then design walk throughs can be helpful. Again, not a talk-through of a process map, but role-playing the different steps with people acting out what they would do will bring the process to life. It also allows everyone to raise those "things that could go wrong" type of questions.

The biggest lesson: accept you haven't got everything right

There is no such thing as a perfect change programme. You can design a new process or system with the very best intentions, which turns out to work brilliantly only 80% of the time. The biggest barrier to change is an inability to compromise on the go-live design. Showing that you are willing to take on board feedback, constructive criticism or improvement suggestions really builds your credibility as a change leader. Keeping the lines of communication open – and the people to respond to feedback on the project for a while after go-live – will help you resolve issues more quickly and it will feel better for everyone involved.

Never forget; if you want to make change happen, you also need to be willing to change yourself.

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i-Realise

6-9 The Square, Stockley Park,
Uxbridge,
UB11 1FW

Tel +44 (0)20 3008 6358
Email info@i-realise.co.uk
Web www.i-realise.co.uk

