

# Putting Change Resistance into Perspective



What can you learn from failure? How can that learning build a foundation for later success?<sup>1</sup>

A strong case supports the idea that understanding failure sets up the groundwork that enables later success.<sup>2</sup> This argument builds on learning theory as applied to organizational change. There is also a tendency of researchers and authors to focus on success stories while overlooking examples of failed attempts at organizational change. This slights the high failure rate of organizational change and the many mentions made about the reasons leading to the failures. Granted, these references by change promoters are made in the context of advocating strategies for success. However, there is a fine line between focusing on success and focusing on failure when it is the same process studied. Yet, there is a tendency of authors of organizational change to focus on success stories and how they can be replicated.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, authors of organizational learning focus on how failure can be a learning opportunity for future success. The learning position is that success and failure are not opposites, but interdependent events that lead to the other. Learning from failure leads to foundational knowledge for success. And success tends to establish organizational stability, setting the stage for possible future failure. The key point is the attitude taken toward failure and not searching for the underlying reasons for failure.

Resistance to organizational change is often seen as an enemy of the change process and therefore, something to directly confront and eliminate. Waddell and Sohal traced changes in attitude toward resistance to change and encouraged an approach to resistance that seeks understanding and value from the resistance.<sup>4</sup> Early organizational change theorists saw resistance as the emergence of divergent opinions that reflected self-interest among those not interested in working for the common good. Human resource theory shifted the focus to resistance as a breakdown in healthy organizations. As the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology started to examine organizational change, resistance came to be viewed as a complex mix of factors. Included in these factors leading to resistance were rational and non-rational factors where individuals perceived the effects of the proposed change differently from management. Other factors were political favoritism and poor management styles.

The systems approach to organizations sees resistance as the result of past and current relationships that have established stability around the status quo that is now being altered in some way by the proposed change. These are all different from a newer view where resistance should be seen as a beneficial form of communication within the change process, that if harnessed, can strengthen the effectiveness of the change process itself. Specific benefits are seen in accepting the resistance to change. First is the recognition that not all change is beneficial and the determination of value can only be determined later from the consequences experienced after the change is implemented. Resistance brings up alternate opinions of what those consequences might be so that the change can be reevaluated within a more diverse set of

assumptions. Maintaining the status quo also has the possible advantage in the efficiencies already built into the stability that has been established. Change might disrupt such stability without regaining the efficiencies that are already present. However, this point is contrary to the need for continual disruption of the system to maintain disequilibrium.

A better explanation of this advantage is the origin of the resistance, which is outside the those promoting the change. Such resistance may not necessarily focus on maintaining stability per se, but advocating alternate approaches to change not encompassed in the changes being proposed. The second advantage is very interesting in that Waddell and Sohal had the opinion that having active resistance is better than a situation of apathy or passive acceptance.<sup>5</sup> This advantage derives from the greater interest that is generated to solve the problem, which might later be converted to support for the original proposed change or possibly some other alternative that arises from the discourse over possible direction the group should take. This is closely related to developing a shared vision where the result produces a much stronger, sustainable solution than a change advocated and pushed by a minority and passively accepted by the majority. Closely related to this advantage is the likelihood that an additional, and possibly better, solution to the problem will be uncovered during the discourse initiated by the resistance.

---

<sup>1</sup> Photo source: [http://s0.geograph.org.uk/geophotos/03/44/32/3443234\\_dd5d924b.jpg](http://s0.geograph.org.uk/geophotos/03/44/32/3443234_dd5d924b.jpg)

<sup>2</sup> Thorne, M. L. (2000). Interpreting corporate transformation through failure. *Management Decision*, 38, 305-314.

<sup>3</sup> Thorne, M. L. (2000). Interpreting corporate transformation through failure. *Management Decision*, 38, 305-314.

<sup>4</sup> Waddell, D., & Sohal, A. S. (1998). Resistance: a constructive tool for change management. *Management Decision*, 36, 543-548.

<sup>5</sup> Waddell, D., & Sohal, A. S. (1998). Resistance: a constructive tool for change management. *Management Decision*, 36, 543-548.