Honoring Resistance to Change

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Abstract

Resistance to change is beneficial for both an advocate who supports change and for a guardian who supports stability. Several positive meanings of resistance are presented serving as a framework for understanding underlying dynamics. Resistance works for the advocate as a system/self diagnostic tool. Also, to the extent that advocates believe that resistance has value, their role is more likely to be that of a learner and less of an adversary. Once advocates and guardians discover what’s really at issue, the natural propensity for advocates to push back or “overcome” may diminish allowing for greater insight into more respectful and empowering change strategies.
Introduction

It often takes on the order of about 10 years for an invention to move from the discovery stage to more general acceptance (Glaser, Abelson, & Garrison, 1983). Often, ideas need further study to eliminate negative side effects, or discoverers fail to recognize the discovery as new or they choose not to write about it. Also, there is the multiplying effect of continuous knowledge generation which requires more time for review. Then there are the social and psychological processes of change, adoption and resistance that affect acceptance and implementation.

When attempting to bring about change or put any new ideas to use, there is bound to be some who for one reason or another oppose the change and contribute to stability. In a system of power differences, setting a direction by one part of the system “invites both joining and opposing forces” (Nevis, 1987). Resistance is as typical of change as roadblocks are when achieving important goals.

At the social system level, resistance can be defined as those forces and norms that maintain stability such that the organization itself, the system identity, is constant (Goldstein, 1988; Watson, 1969). An individual’s resistance is expressed by those behaviors and attitudes that maintain a current state of healthy self-regulation (Nevis, 1987).

Resistance is a healthy and natural part of any successful change effort and recommendations have been made for change agents to use resistance constructively (Klein, 1969; Zaltman & Duncan, 1977). However, the concept of resistance has a definite pejorative connotation for it is often applied to those who refuse influence, it’s positive value seems paradoxical and “overcoming” it seems logical though typically counterproductive.

Resistance Has Constructive Value

The basic premise adopted here follows the same guiding principle adopted from systems theory, Aikido and brief therapy: Understanding the positive value and underlying purpose of resistance is an effective way to join with any challenging energy towards more mutual problem solving (Goldstein, 1988; Saposnek, 1980).

Goldstein (1988) believes that resistance functions as a survival mechanism for the guardian. He suggests that one appropriate strategy is to view “the resistance itself as a key to greater information about the system—specifically it’s nodal points … where change is resisted [and] to identify the ‘settings’ of the equilibrium by seeing … at which points the system goes along with the change and at which points it starts to resist [and] to question the participants about these ‘settings’.”

Finally, he suggests reframing the resistance to the participants as an affirmation of it’s constructive value—the positive role it’s playing in system and self-regulation.

Goldstein’s model might be extended by searching for other underlying dynamics that function to support a guardian’s resistance and by considering ways in which resistance helps advocates achieve their goals as well. For the advocate specifically, figuring out what’s at stake when resistance is encountered may lead to a more respectful joint search for alternative means and outcomes that will accommodate everyone’s needs and replace any tendency to push back.

What are some possible “nodal points” and “settings” to watch for? What might be the constructive value of resistance? Table 1 provides a framework for considering how resistance might be a constructive force from the perspectives of both the advocate and the guardian.
Table 1—What resistance could mean to an advocate of change and a guardian of stability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resistance Allows</th>
<th>For The Advocate</th>
<th>For The Guardian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Free Thinking</td>
<td>Prevents uniform thinking and group-think</td>
<td>Prevents personally damaging or trendy changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sensitivity</td>
<td>Creates greater sensitivity to core values and cultural differences</td>
<td>Creates greater sensitivity to side effects and repercussions of change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Understanding</td>
<td>Allows for system understanding</td>
<td>Allows for self understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Measure Interest</td>
<td>Measures importance</td>
<td>Measures interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Dealing with Loss</td>
<td>Identifies potential losses and hints at substitutes</td>
<td>Identifies potential losses and allows for acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Commitment</td>
<td>Tests an advocate’s commitment to endure</td>
<td>Allows a guardian’s commitment to build</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Participation</td>
<td>Maintains community values to participate and disagree</td>
<td>Provides a sense of control and security while actively working out differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Venting</td>
<td>Resolves initial tensions</td>
<td>Vents old feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Equalize Power</td>
<td>Serves as a cue for disempowerment</td>
<td>Serves as a way to balance power</td>
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</table>
The Value of Resistance for the Advocate

Resistance helps prevent groupthink. In highly cohesive decision making groups, there is a tendency towards uniform thinking or groupthink (Janis, 1967). When a new idea is being considered by such groups, a guardian’s resistance raises doubts and brings problems and solutions out in the open. Resistance legitimizes the role of devil’s advocate, creating the challenge for the group to search for new ideas that will improve the original plan. It raises issues that need attention, preventing the group from going along with potentially damaging plans. As Janis (1967) points out, more open resistance to the Bay of Pigs invasion plans might have saved the United States from that famous disaster.

Resistance may indicate that an advocate of change has failed to understand the system, has failed to identify with a core value of the system, or has failed to value cultural differences (Klein, 1969). Foster (1962) cites a clear example. United States Department of Agriculture extension agents got Mexican-American farmers to use a new hybrid corn. After four years, nearly all the farmers gave up the hybrid corn even with its three-fold increase in yield because their wives complained that the color, texture and taste of tortillas didn’t match traditional characteristics.

The resistance that guardians exhibit points to community norms, values and interests, particularly toward the change, the advocate and toward “outsiders”. Resistance can demonstrate those areas of the change that participants are clear about. It can help the advocate diagnose the cause of resistance so that the change strategies being used can be made more appropriate to the specific setting.

Resistance can also be used to measure the level of interest in the change itself. If no resistance is encountered, this might mean that apathy has set in and that those involved have very little to lose or gain from the change. In this case, the change might be adopted rapidly only to fall off later for lack of any real commitment. Nevis (1987) makes the point succinctly: “all resistance is the mobilization of energy, not a lack of energy”. Block (1981) has even suggested that the quick acceptance of an advocate’s solution may actually be an indicator of resistance.

Making a change means trading one thing for another and having to give something up (a lifestyle, a way of behaving, an identity, etc.). So, there is bound to be some feeling of loss involved with making any change. Resistance may tell the advocate what the guardian stands to lose during this change process. The guardian may provide ideas on how to replace the loss, how to lessen the quality or depth of the experienced loss, or how to help them move through the stages of loss more appropriately.

Resistance naturally occurs during most change efforts. Sometimes, at the first sign of strong resistance, advocates’ feelings of dissatisfaction, betrayal, or depression may cause them to abandon the change effort. So, this resistance actually helps advocates measure their own level of commitment and energy in finding effective ways to help change the system. It helps advocates consider how important this change is for themselves. Is it not so important that initial signs of resistance are met with abdication? Is it too important that over-investment in specific means and goals cancels any honest discussion of differences?

The resistance by guardians may represent a stand for community values and norms regarding how change is supposed to happen (e.g., It’s not OK to force change on everyone; People have a right to stand up to those who are trying to push them around; People should be involved in the decisions that affect them; Change is a slow process). These shared values about participation, decision making and timing are important for advocates to recognize and build on if the change is to be successfully implemented. Also, it allows the advocate an opportunity to build credibility by demonstrating how conflicts and opinion differences will be handled and to sense the community’s ability to resolve conflict themselves.

Guardians may carry feelings from the past that play an important role in skewing their perception of what the change may realistically mean for them. Honestly airing this resistance may resolve old tensions and drop out the potential for obstruction later on. Some may “need to say ‘no’ before they can ‘say’” (Nevis, 1987).

Some guardians may exhibit more resistance than they actually feel personally. The advocate might consider that the guardian is acting as a voice for others who don’t feel as safe to express their true feelings. This type of resistance is of value to the advocate as a diagnostic cue signaling the level of system openness and empowerment.
The Value of Resistance to the Guardian

Change is not always helpful. Sometimes it is trendy and in the long run, may turn out to be too costly or damaging. Perhaps the timing is poor. So, it’s important to consider not changing as an option. Resistance helps the guardian to think twice at accepting things the way they are: Do things work well enough now? Is this change for change sake? Guardians who maintain a precautionary note allows themselves ample time to evaluate the options available, the direction that the process is taking and whether they have the personal resources to fulfill any new expectations.

Any change has a ripple effect on our lives. There are always repercussions that don’t initially come to mind. Resistance provides the guardian with hints at the possible unanticipated side effects of change, their value and how to adjust for them (Klein, 1969). There is a need to anticipate just what those ripple effects might be so everyone is in a better position to judge whether the change is worthwhile.

Resistance also tells guardians about themselves—what their values and interests are toward the change. It helps them to diagnose the forces at work so they can fine-tune their intended goals and strategies.

Self-understanding also leads guardians to separate wishes from wants. We all have wishes. Resistance to wish fulfillment helps guardians look at what they really want—to make a change or to accept the present circumstances just the way they are. Resistance can help them realize that their stated “want” is really a “wish” that they can enjoy and at the same time eliminate any guilt about not fulfilling it (Pates, 1981).

Resistance can also be a sign to the guardian that the change being advanced may be personally important and valuable. So, their resistance can serve as a measure of how much importance they attach to the change being considered.

Loss is inherent in making any change and there are several emotions associated with it. The loss can take many forms: loss of habits, status, security, friendship, mental set, norms, autonomy, control, or prestige to name a few. As a filter for feelings, resistance helps guardians consider and finally accept their personal loss. It slows down the process of changing so that guardians are more likely to acknowledge what it is that they are about to give up, to work through any associated anger, to look for ways to cope appropriately and finally to come to accept the hope for a better future.

Another value of resistance may be in it’s relationship to commitment. Similar to the association between task challenge and motivation, a bell-shaped curve may represent this relationship as well. So, if there is very little resistance experienced, guardians may be less likely to build any commitment to making the change happen. It’s analogous to having an easy challenge that can be achieved any time with little effort. One is likely to feel very little motivation or sense of achievement from such an easy task. However, if the challenge is sufficient, then one is likely to build excitement as it is completed. Once the challenge is too great, frustration may eventually lead to task failure. Resistance may work the same way. When guardians do feel resistance (and as long as it’s not overwhelming), their commitment will grow as they consider the forces and reasons behind the change. Working through their resistance will create acceptance that will help sustain the change over the long term. Some of the most resistant guardians have become the most vocal advocates of change once they have been able to integrate their initial resistance.

Change requires people to take a risks and this creates insecurity. Resistance helps guardians to balance this insecurity. By slowing down the pace, it gives them a sense of power and control to actively influence how much and how fast they change. Resistance allows them to feel like an active player rather than a passive recipient of change. As an active player, they can learn and practice effective ways to deal with differences. Resistance may create new coalitions and force consensus on deeply felt values.

Resistance gives guardians a chance to vent any immediate feelings that might sabotage the change being considered. Airing initial attitudes and “old baggage” may set the stage for a more objective view of what the change will mean.

Finally, guardians might use their resistance to act as spokespersons, articulating the frustrations and helplessness of more introverted or intimidated co-workers. Their resistance may signify a felt need to balance organizational power differences and help others avoid more intense confrontations.
From Adversary to Learner

This article has tried to show that resistance has value. Contrary to common conceptions, resistance works for the advocate as well as for the guardian particularly as a diagnostic tool. To the extent that advocates believe that there is value in resistance, their role is more likely to be that of a learner attempting to understand the meaning of resistance for themselves and for the system they are a part of. A learning role helps avoid an over-investment in outcomes that excludes the discussion of differences and leads to adversarial conflict.

The possible meanings presented in Table 1 might serve as a framework for understanding the underlying dynamics of resistance—for determining what’s at issue. Once these dynamics are better understood, the natural propensity to “overcome” will diminish allowing for greater insight into more respectful, empowering and useful strategies for processing the “no” together.

References


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