

Reducing Resistance to Change and Conflict: A Key to Successful Leadership

Article One: Models of Resistance to Change

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You can't steal second base with your foot on first

Kenneth Rose (Rose, 2003), in his article reviewing John Bennett's models of leadership (Bennett 2001), mentioned two philosophers who spoke about change.

'In 513 B.C., Heraclitus of Greece observed, "There is nothing permanent except change." And in the 16th century, Niccolo Machiavelli stated in his political treatise, *The Prince*, "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.'"

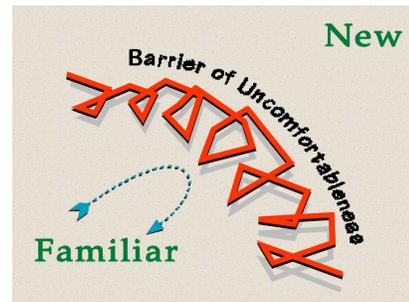
Change is inevitable, but it can also be uncomfortable. Because it is uncomfortable, most people tend to resist change. **One of the most important responsibilities of an effective leader is to reduce people's resistance to change in order to promote growth in the organization.**

According to John P. Kotter, retired Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership at Harvard Business School in Boston, most organizations do a poor job of implementing large-scale change because of resistance within the organization (Fandray 2003). In a study of 288 companies who shared lessons and best practices in change management (Creasey 2003), Tim Creasey found that the top obstacle to change was employee resistance at all levels. In this report, "participants indicated that there is a natural human resistance to change that impacted project success."

According to William Bridges and Susan Mitchell (Bridges & Mitchell, 2000), change is difficult because of the uncomfortable, internal process of transition through which people must move. Bridges and Mitchell point out that "change is external (the different policy, practice, or structure that the leader is trying to bring about) while transition is internal (a psychological reorientation that people have to go through before the change can work). Transition takes longer because it requires that people undergo three separate processes, and all of them are upsetting." Three stages are defined: 1) Saying Goodbye, 2) The Neutral Zone, and 3) Moving Forward.

People resist the first stage of *Saying Goodbye* to the old because they are more comfortable with their old habits – with what they know, even if it doesn't work. As people move away from what is familiar toward what is new, they start to feel uncomfortable, so they tend to slip right back into the same old ineffective way of doing things. This can be true even when they view the new goal as being a desired outcome.

The new, by definition, is unknown. It is the fear of the unknown, the discomfort with what is not familiar that characterizes Bridges & Mitchell's second phase, the *Neutral Zone*, the "in-between state (that) is so full of uncertainty and confusion that simply coping with it takes most of people's energy." The *Neutral Zone* is uncomfortable, so people are driven to get out of it. Unfortunately, instead of moving through the discomfort into



new improvements, they cling to the old, ineffective, familiar ways. In an organization that has punished mistakes, people will hesitate to embrace the new ways during the third phase of *Moving Forward*, until they know it is safe. So even when people know they want to get to second base, they have a false sense of security on first base. They resist the risks associated with changes and transitions.

Resistance to change is a natural defense mechanism. We should be wary when we are stepping into unfamiliar territory. Unfortunately, it is commonly known that for some people the best defense is a good offense. Aggressive and defensive behaviors are often turned against the other members of our own tribe, so we fight with each other about who should be in charge of the hunting party while the predators surround us and get ready for a hostile takeover.

Laws of physics state that it takes a certain amount of energy to overcome inertia, and that resistance (friction) is a force that will slow down a moving object. In his series of [online tutorials](#), Tom Henderson explains basic principles of physics that were first proposed by Galileo and Newton. "All objects resist changes in their state of motion . . . they have inertia. But do some objects have more of a tendency to resist changes than others? Absolutely yes!" (Henderson 1996-2001). Henderson goes on to explain that this tendency is solely dependant upon mass – the more mass, the more inertia, and the more resistance to change in motion. But it is possible to create leverage to overcome inertia, and to use lubrication to reduce friction (resistance).

Inertia and resistance are found in the laws of physics, but also in relation to change in people and organizations. One could say that all people tend to resist change, but some people tend to resist more than others! The "psychological mass" which provides resistance would be the rigid beliefs and habits that weigh down a person's mind. While it is not possible to completely remove the

discomfort associated with the stages of change, it is possible to overcome people's inertia to saying goodbye to the old habits, and to reduce people's resistance to change. The goal is not zero resistance – that is not possible. The goal is to move through the resistance more quickly. This series of articles proposes a number of models and techniques that can be used by leaders to reduce people's resistance to change, and to resolve more quickly the conflicts that are associated with change.

The Concerns Based Adoption Model

The **Concerns Based Adoption Model** (CBAM) is a conceptual model developed by Educational Psychologist Dr. Frances Fuller (Hall et al, 1973). The CBAM hypothesizes a predictable hierarchy of concerns that individuals experience when adopting any new innovation. Whether this change is a student learning to be a teacher (the original application of the CBAM), or an employee learning computer software, the privatization of a former government agency, or the inevitable doing more with less, the stages involved in adopting any innovation are the same.

There are three basic Stages of Concern defined in the CBAM: (1) Concern for Self, (2) Concern for Task, and (3) Concern for Impact. Most organizations only address the concerns for task, if any are addressed at all. CBAM suggests that the successful accomplishment of an intervention is directly dependent on moving employees through each of these levels of concern.

Concern for Self. Everyone worries. Whenever change occurs we worry how the change will affect us. Am I up to the challenge? Can I learn what I need in order to succeed in the new system? How will it affect my job, my future, and me? Will I be able to do what is required? (Even Konosuke Matsushita said, "It's alright to worry. . . . What is important is our response. . ." (Source: <http://mif-iuj.org/kanosuke.html>)

Concern for Task. What am I required to do? What are the steps necessary to succeed? What follows what? What do I have to do and how do I do it? Who else is involved in me successfully accomplishing my task?

Concern for Impact. What difference will this change really make? How will it affect how decisions are made? What will I be able to do that I can't do now? Why will it be better? How will I be able to serve others better?

No Gripe Sessions

One note of caution is to avoid letting this process of understanding concerns turn into a series of gripe sessions. Gripe sessions are rarely productive because they do not get people focused on positive solutions. The *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI) approach (Whitney & Schau, 1998), developed by Dr. David Cooperrider and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University and The Taos Institute, proposes that organizations change in the direction of what they study. Inquiry plants the seeds of the future. AI recommends that leaders focus on what has worked *successfully* in the past and how this applies to the future.

This may seem to be in contrast to the CBAM's recommendation of focusing on concerns for change. If you encourage people to only talk about their concerns your organization could turn into an ongoing therapy session that may be good for personal growth but doesn't get the job done.

The CBAM is not simply a touchy-feely approach to making people feel better about what they may not like. To lead people through a period of change it is not sufficient to simply state the positive changes you want to make and give directives. The CBAM hypothesizes that when people are faced with a change they must go through three stages of Concern for Self (become aware, gather information, consider personal implications) before being prepared to deal with the Task Concerns (learning of routine, new tasks), which then prepares them to contribute to the Impact (improve benefits, collaborate with colleagues, re-evaluate quality and seek major modifications or alternatives). If the Self or Task Concerns are not addressed, employees will be distracted, and therefore not adequately prepared to contribute to the Impact.

According to the CBAM, a leader must address the concerns of employees and managers about the change. But the trick is in *how* to address concerns without letting people focus on the negative aspects, and thereby to continue whining and complaining. This is accomplished by helping them experience feeling understood about their concerns, while also keeping them focused on a positive vision for growth. Bridges and Mitchell encourage leaders to focus on communicating the "*Four P's of Transition*" that emphasize connections with and concern for people (Mitchell 2003):

1. The *purpose*: Why we have to do this.
2. The *picture*: What it will look and feel like when we reach our goal.
3. The *plan*: Step-by-step, how we will get there.
4. The *part*: What you can (and need to) do to help us move forward.

People are usually motivated first to fulfill their own individual needs. Leaders must also motivate people to work together collaboratively to resolve the problems of the organization or institution. To do this CBAM should be used to

link people's concerns to each of Bridges and Madison's "Four P's of Transition." The following points outline the psychology behind motivating individuals with CBAM and the Four P's of Transition.

I am motivated to fulfill my needs.

My needs must be met, in order to motivate me to effectively put policy or changes into place.

My concerns arise when my needs may not be met (*concerns for self, task, impact*).

If you don't understand my needs, how can your changes, policies, and solutions (the *Plan* and the *Part*) be relevant to me?

If I know that you understand my concerns, and you can link them to your solutions, I'll have less need to defend my needs.

Therefore I will be less resistant and more motivated to implementing your solutions (the *Plan* and the *Part*) even if I disagree with the solution.

The aim is to reduce resistance, although one will not necessarily remove the resistance completely. Together with Bridges and Mitchell's "Four P's of Transition", CBAM focuses management's attention on specific areas of concern when making a change or giving a directive. The CBAM model suggests that while developing the *Four P's*, a leader should inquire about the concerns of those employees who will be touched by the change. If employees perceive that the *Purpose, Picture, Plan, and the Parts* incorporate a response to their concerns, then their resistance will be reduced.

Bridges & Mitchell's approach emphasizes "connections with and concern for people." In an interview for the Leader to Leader website, John Kotter speaks to the same motivational key (Kotter, 2003), "People change their behavior when they are motivated to do so, and that happens when you speak to their feelings. **You don't have to spend a million dollars and six months to prepare for a change effort. You do have to make sure that you touch people emotionally.**" When people feel that you understand their concerns you touch them emotionally and help them feel more secure. When they know their *Part* in a *Plan* that can bring the whole organization to the *Picture* that resolves their concerns, they will be emotionally inspired to reach beyond their individual concerns and contribute to the good of the whole.

In the same article (Kotter, 2003), Kotter's statement of how to motivate employees to embrace changes reflects the basic principles of CBAM.

"Employees need to understand that the changes are not oddball ideas being pushed by the bosses. They need to see short-term wins that demonstrate the validity of the change vision (*concerns*

about impact). If the win is not ambiguous, is visible (*concerns about task*), and is of value to people (*concerns about self*), then people will say, "yes, I get it" and be more likely to help make change happen."

There Are Many Leaders

There is another reason why it is important to address the concerns of people at all levels of the organization. Kotter also states, "Leaders exist at all levels of an organization. At the edges of the enterprise, of course, leaders are accountable for less territory. Their vision may sound more basic; the number of people to motivate may be two. *But they perform the same leadership role as their more senior counterparts*. They excel at seeing things through fresh eyes and at challenging the status quo. They are energetic and seem able to run through, or around, obstacles." (Kotter, 1998)

These people may bring unique perspectives and solutions to the change process. Or their ideas may be just what management wanted. But when they are allowed to contribute, they will see the relevance of the change to their own needs. And if these potential leaders are not given the opportunity to invest their energy in contributing, they may invest their energy in leading a resistance movement simply because they feel that their concerns are not understood.

Not merely asking permission

In the Prosci Benchmarking Report on change management, Creasey and Hiatt point out that the leadership should make it clear that this process of involving everyone is not one of seeking permission to make the change. One of the key messages to communicate is "the expectation that change will happen and is not a choice." (Creasey 2003.) Their Best Practices in Change Management presents clear, common sense suggestions that reflect the guidelines of CBAM, The Three Stages of Transition, and The Four P's of Transition. (A complete copy of the report can be obtained at www.prosci.com).

Communications

Two recommendations from Creasey and Hiatt reflect the power of a leader's personal impact in communicating about change: (1) ". . . face-to-face communications were the most effective, including group and team meetings, presentations and demonstrations, one-on-one discussions"; and (2) "Communications should be open and risk free where employees can ask

questions.” This shows sensitivity to CBAM’s emphasis on responding to concerns. However, creating an “open and risk free” environment is not as simple as scheduling a question and answer session. Consider the following case study.

A government agency had provided overtime work to employees for fifty years. In 1998 this policy was changed in order to cut costs. But the employees had come to depend on this overtime pay, not as a bonus, but as a requirement to support their basic lifestyles. This change in income produced a fundamental Self Concern for the employees.

The Manager presented this announcement to the front line supervisors in a weekly meeting, and asked if anyone had any questions. After waiting five seconds for a response, while the supervisors sat in stunned silence, the Manager said, “O.K.,” and began to proceed to the next topic on the agenda. A consultant was present at the meeting in order to give feedback. He interrupted and asked the Manager if he thought that the absence of questions meant that no one had any questions or concerns. The Manager said, “I don’t know if no one says anything.” So the consultant said, “Let’s find out.”

He facilitated a process in which each person wrote down a list of concerns that his employees would have when the supervisor made the announcement. Then teams were formed to combine these individual lists into team lists. Each team shared its list with the whole group. In this way the small group discussion provided opportunity for a more free flow of information, and each individual could have his or her concerns represented by the team without having to stand out. The Manager reflected back to the supervisors the concerns they were expressing (concerns of employees and of supervisors), and all were written down for further study. Further steps were taken at a later time to explore what support could be generated to help people with these concerns.

The supervisors said it was one of the best staff meetings they ever had. This was true even though the difficult change was still going to happen. They understood the Purpose and the Picture of the change. What happened in this meeting that had never happened before was they felt that their concerns were understood by management, and would be factored into the Plan of action.

The final article in this series proposes a number of group processes for facilitating such interaction beyond simple question and answer sessions. Although the processes are simple, the facilitation can be complex and is best performed by a professional who has been certified in these processes.

How to Communicate The Four P's

Other communication recommendations from Creasey and Hiatt emphasized the difference between the Purpose, Picture, and Plan aspects of the change message, and the Part that each employee should play. Based on the feedback from their study, they concluded that the CEO or President is the best person to communicate messages that influence control over the direction of the business (Purpose, Picture, Plan), while the Direct Supervisor is most appropriate for messages that influence control over the direction of daily activities (Part).

Important messages to communicate

The most important messages to communicate to impacted employees fall into two categories.

1. Messages about things: (from the CEO or President)

- Current situation and rationale for the change (*Purpose*).

- Vision of organization after change takes place (*Picture*).

- The basics of what is changing, how it **will** change, and when it will change (*Plan*).

- The expectation that change will happen and is not a choice.

- Status updates on the implementations of the change, including success stories.

2. Messages about how the change impacted the employee: (from the Supervisor) (*Part*).

- Impact of change on the day-to-day activities (WIIFM).

- Implications of change on job security (will I have a job?).

- Specific behaviors and activities expected from the employee, including support of the change.

- Procedures for getting help and assistance during the change.

Upcoming Series

These models (*The Barrier of Uncomfortableness*, *CBAM*, *The Three Stages of Transition*, and *The Four P's of Transition*) can be helpful in understanding the nature of change in an organization, and the effect it has on people's behavior and productivity. In addition to this awareness of change, processes are needed to guide group and individual interactions in such a way that as many as possible will feel safe to express disagreements, and confident that their concerns will at least be factored into the decision.

The following articles in this series will present various decision-making models and communication techniques for improving one-to-one communication and for facilitating respectful behavior in groups. Also presented will be a unique perspective on the relationship between *respect* and *understanding*, and how these relate to basic principles of gaining leverage in the martial arts and in communication.

The ultimate objective of using these techniques is to establish a work environment in which everyone feels safe to disagree so that communication is more open and work is more productive.