 Resistance to Change: A Blessing or a Curse?

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INTRODUCTION
Resistance to change has long been the centre of attention of managerial research studies due to its immense importance in influencing the overall success and failure of an organisational change process. The extent, level and magnitude of resistance that an organisational change persists determine how successful and effective it will be or otherwise fail to achieve its objectives. According to Maurer (1996), around one-half to two-thirds of organisational changes that take place in companies fail to meet their intended objectives whereby the resistance to change is a crucial yet often the most ignored contributing factor in this regard. In the research studies undertaken by Oakland and Sohal (1987) specifically in UK, it was concluded that resistance is one of the major factors that influenced the successful implementation of the production management techniques in the British manufacturing companies. Likewise, in the research studies conducted by Eisen et al., (1992) and Teriziovski et al., (1997) the effective use of quality management practice was greatly under the influence of the management’s and the worker’s resistance to its acceptance in the manufacturing industry in Australia. Other studies, however, such as those conducted by Kotter et al., (1986) provide evidence of the fact that resistance to change alone cannot be blamed for the ineffective implementation of change (Coch, and French, 1948; Grusky and Miller, 1970; Bartlett and Kayser, 1973; Albanese, 1973; Eisen, et al., 1992). There are other factors such as the approach taken on by the managers with regards to change that affects the successful change management process. The approach comprises of the beliefs and attitudes that are a part of the managerial practice which may result in a failure to understand the complex
procedures and other complications incumbent in the change process resulting in the ineffective implementation of the change required by the organisation in context (Kaufman, 1971; Hultman, 1979; Janis, 1982; Ansoff, 1988; Leigh, 1988; Block, 1989; Bemmels and Reshef, 1991). This approach often casts a negative light upon the subject of resistance to change whereby always viewing it as the cause of the failure to manage change and overlooking its otherwise positive contributions (Schein, 1988, p. 243).

After carefully examining the literature it comes to the understanding that some researches in the 1960s and 1970s did, however, take on an adversarial approach towards resistance to change whereby providing implications that it may be a utility after all rather than a merely menace (Coch, and French, 1948; Grusky and Miller, 1970; Bartlett and Kayser, 1973; Albanese, 1973; Eisen, et al., 1992). As much as the current literature excludes this discretion, the present paper highlights the usefulness and positives that come out of resistance to change in the change management process. Before arguing for it, however, a quick view is taken upon why the blame for the failure to change is often borne by resistance to change in the organisation, and the background as to why it could be of help for the managers. Followed by this, a detailed explanation of the literature on resistance is provided with the specific focus upon using it as a managerial tool and utility that aids in the effective management of change as support for the argument that resistance may be a blessing after all and not necessarily a curse as the common viewpoint is among managers.

DEFINING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE IN ORGANISATIONS

According to Schein (1988), resistance to change is in fact one of the most ubiquitous of the phenomena prevailing in modern organisations. Because of the very complex nature of the phenomenon, it has been in the focus of various managerial research studies for decades and several researchers have attempted to define it and explore its various factors and elements. The most prominent of the definitions of resistance to change was given by Ansoff (1988, p. 207). He defined resistance to change as a phenomenon with multiple faces and forces acting upon it that in a combined influence produce several consequences affecting the work environment such as in the form of unanticipated delays in work performances, additional costs and expenses, and overall unstable environment that completely alters the strategic direction desired via the change being implemented by the management (Kaufman, 1971; Hultman, 1979; Janis, 1982; Ansoff, 1988; Leigh, 1988; Block, 1989; Bemmels and Reshef, 1991). On the other hand, the definition given by Zaltman and Duncan (1977, p. 63) follows that resistance is that force that attempts to maintain the status quo where there are pressures to change the status quo in the organisational or social context.

Therefore, resistance to change in an organisation is the expression provided by the work environment constituting of employees and management that is a clear response to change in the form of keeping oneself or a group reserved from making the change happen or accepting it (Block 1989, p. 199). The response of the employees as an expression with regard to the occurring change is seen by the management as attempts to stop, halt or delay the process (Bemmels and Reshef, 1991, p. 231) which brings negative viewpoints towards the phenomenon of resistance to change and it has come to be taken as a counter-productive force that negatively influences the behavior and performance of

RESISTANCE AS A CAUSE OF FAILING TO CHANGE
As briefly stated earlier, one-half to two-thirds of the changes that occur and are inculcated in the corporate environment fail to achieve the targets and produce rather scary figures and outcomes and induce a chaotic environment which is not favorable for the productivity desired by the organisations. Whereby the ineffective outcome from the change process may be attributable to a variety of reasons, resistance to change is the factor that often takes the entire blame as recognized time and again by research studies. In the context of the organisation, resistance to change is the expression of keeping oneself reserved from the occurring events, as a response. According to the managers, the attempts to halt or stop the process altogether come in the form of resistance to change (Kaufman, 1971; Hultman, 1979; Janis, 1982; Ansoff, 1988; Leigh, 1988; Block, 1989; Bemmels and Reshef, 1991).

There are two aspects of resistance to change: it can be taken as a menace altogether and an enemy which is always harmful to the process of change and brings no good to the organisational performance and other is the positive side of the resistance of change which is the focus of the paper. In the managerial context and understanding of the 1940s, the unity of the workforce towards goals and objectives and targets was considered as the hallmark of the superior management practice and stood as the sign of a successful organisation. In this regard, resistance came to be known as the source of evil and a distraction that was nothing short of a pure enemy to an otherwise perfect organisational and managerial setting. Resistance was thus an enemy of positive changes that were to bring organisational progress and growth (Kaufman, 1971; Hultman, 1979; Janis, 1982; Ansoff, 1988; Leigh, 1988; Block, 1989; Bemmels and Reshef, 1991). During this time and after there were the human resource theories relating to resistance which proclaimed it to be a negative consequence in the organisation stemming from the attempts to bring change. It was known as a breakdown in the otherwise normal relationships and interactions with in the work environment that resulted in conflicts among groups and departments (Coch, and French, 1948; Grusky and Miller, 1970; Bartlett and Kayser, 1973; Albanese, 1973; Eisen, et al., 1992).

But with the advent of more advanced sociological, psychological and anthological research interventions in the subject matter this conventional approach came to be drastically challenged. The research studies in a diverse environment provided evidence of resistance of change being a rather complex phenomenon with the following key factors and aspects: rational, non-rational, and political and management related. In the rational aspect, resistance occurs as the result of the individual and cognitive assessment of the situation of change which results in response undesirable or deviating from that desired by the management (Ansoff, 1988, p. 211; Grusky and Miller, 1970, p. 63; Kotter et al., 1986, p. 352). Non-rational aspect or factor of resistance is in the form of non-rational assessment of the change that is taking place which results in a series of non-favorable responses that disrupt the overall performance of the organisation and management in question (Judson, 1966, p. 19; Kaufman, 1971, p. 15; McNurry, 1973, p. 381; Sayles and Straus, 1960, p. 305). The resistance undertaken by the employees if
often the result of the political influences such as favoritism or point scoring that go against the change initiating forces or parties (Blau, 1970, p. 135 (cited in Grusky and Miller, 1970); Ansoff, 1988, p. 212).

Lastly, the management style and approach taken to implement a change influences the amount and magnitude of resistance from the employees which may either provoke it in the negative form or eliminate it altogether (Judson, 1966, p. 32; Lawrence, 1954, p. 53). As a progressive viewpoint of this school of thought the idea stemmed of taking resistance of change in the positive consideration and a way to actually improve management of change in the modern organisations (Lawrence, 1954; Judson, 1966; Litterer, 1973; McNurry, 1973; Kotter, et al., 1986; Makin, et al., 1989; Milton, et al., 1984). This brings a strong contrast to the traditional viewpoint and is often challenged by a vast amount of literature stating it as an obstacle for successful change implementation, otherwise (Coch, and French, 1948; Grusky and Miller, 1970; Bartlett and Kayser, 1973; Albanese, 1973; Eisen, et al., 1992).

Taking resistance as a utility for change management requires the need to take resistance as a tool that allows balancing the pressures from the internal and external environment and the incumbent forces in the change process, whereby the focus is towards establishing stability and constancy in the overall change management initiative. The key challenge in change management is of establishing this stability and avoiding dysfunctionality of the initiative from happening (Sayles and Straus, 1960; Oakland and Sohal, 1987; Lewin, 1991; Maurer, 1996; Terziiovski, et al., 1997; Mooney, 1999).

It is not necessary that when a change is proposed it is the best option for the organisation in question as managers do tend to make some irrational decisions without proper consideration of the holistic viewpoint of the organisation. However, when resistance is witnessed taking it as an ally or blessing in disguise provides evidence of the lack of stability and functionality of the proposed change for the managers (Urwick, 1947; Thomas and Bennis, 1972; Simon, 1976; Zaltman and Duncan, 1977; Tichy, 1983; Schein, 1988; White and Bednar, 1991). When managers in such occasions confront the resistance rather than crush it before analyzing the root cause of it, the argument stems up that change is not being properly managed and can be more smoothly in transition if all factors both negative and positive are considered for the benefit of the organisation (Kaufman, 1971; Hultman, 1979; Janis, 1982; Ansoff, 1988; Leigh, 1988; Block, 1989; Bemmels and Reshef, 1991).

Resistance is a source of immense energy in the change process which provides insights as to the problems and their causes that affect the change process. The requirement is to examine the situation closely to determine the causes of resistance and begin searching for alternative measures to implement the desired change, and then choose the options that otherwise do not cause the spur of resistance among the workforce (Coch, and French, 1948; Grusky and Miller, 1970; Bartlett and Kayser, 1973; Albanese, 1973; Eisen, et al., 1992). Resistance, under this view, is taken as a cue or sign that the approach for change management taken, way it is being implemented, or the change decision itself offers some source of problem or inaccuracy or unsuitability for the organisation or there is a lack of management and workforce cohesion and integration that results in the present dysfunctional situation that halts the effective change implementation process. Resistance is thus, a response triggered from reasons which affect the change from happening which are directly attributable to the management and
the environment which have to be closely monitored. In this regard, resistance is a blessing that guides the managers that the environment offers some sources of deviance that have to be corrected so that desired objectives can be attained in the right time (Kaufman, 1971; Hultman, 1979; Janis, 1982; Ansoff, 1988; Leigh, 1988; Block, 1989; Bemmels and Reshef, 1991). This viewpoint highlights and establishes the usefulness of resistance for managing change in organisations but also pinpoint that the procedure of viewing and understanding resistance is a complex one because there are several underlying factors and forces that shape up resistance and the managers have to get to the bottom of the entire situation and the environment to resolve the problem at hand and implement effectively the change planned and attain the desired outcomes from it with the strong support of the workforce.

RESISTANCE AS A UTILITY FOR EFFECTIVE CHANGE MANAGEMENT

The major causes of halt in the industrial progress have been attributed to ineffective change management and the failure to implement the desired change in which the key underlying source of concern is the resistance undertaken with regard to change in the organisation (McNurry, 1973, p. 380). According to Hultman (1979, p. 54), it has become a common managerial practice to associate negative perceptions and thinking with the phenomenon of resistance, however, this is a misconception as often resistance has been found to be a useful tool in the practicing management. Leigh (1988, p. 73) states that resistance is the rightful response from the workers as they in the form of their behaviors or actions in the workplace in the process of change explain how poorly structured or irrational the change decision may be and indicate how it could be improved (Zaltman and Duncan, 1977, p. 62).

Taking resistance as a tool and a utility to aid in the effective managerial practice takes a juxtaposed position in the tradition and conventional argument against resistance and it being an evil in the game of change. However, the major conclusion that has been reached by various scholars is that resistance brings positives to management practice and should be taken as a utility and a tool that aids in effective management of change. For this careful understanding of the factors underlying the resistance to change should be undertaken (Kaufman, 1971; Hultman, 1979; Janis, 1982; Ansoff, 1988; Leigh, 1988; Block, 1989; Bemmels and Reshef, 1991).

When resistance occurs in the workplace in response to a change being implemented the fallacy in behavior points out that the change is not considered as inherently good in the organisation (Coch, and French, 1948; Grusky and Miller, 1970; Bartlett and Kayser, 1973; Albanese, 1973; Eisen, et al., 1992). The outcome determines the effectiveness of the change initiative and thus, prior to its implementation and the consequences, it is difficult to predict how well it be and what good it will bring to the organisation in definite terms. Only after tenure of sufficient time, the outcome from the change can be acquired and evaluated for its effectiveness (Hultman, 1979, p. 53).

The crucial role that is played by resistance comes in the form of its influence upon the stability in the organisation. Where the organisational workplace continues to be under the pressure from the forces of the internal and external environment, the resistance acts as a strong force that shields against the pressures that otherwise hamper the need for stability and functionality of the workplace (Kaufman, 1971; Hultman, 1979; Janis, 1982;
Resistance allows processes and activities to remain steady and thus induce stabilization and consistency in operations and outcomes whereby making sure consolidation remains intact between all processes and activities. This stability allows making predictions and forecasts easier and much more accurate. Management control is much stronger in this regard whereby stability and consistency is dominant and the processes are steady. This momentum and steadiness is also crucial for the survival of organisations where certainty is often rare and such steadiness guarantee certainty and predictability of outcomes (Albanese, 1973, pp. 413-17; Hultman, 1979, p. 53).

While the required for steadiness and consistency is required for making accurate predictions of performance, the contemporary literature and studies of management and organisational environment strongly stress upon bringing continuous innovations and improvements to existing systems and processes which in other words are merely ‘changes’ in the work environment that bring with them the challenge of dealing with resistance. The key to effective management therein is to sustain stability while bringing change so as to not cause dysfunctionality in the work processes and productivity. For this harmonizing the employees’ responses to the change is necessary which only comes from taking their viewpoint in the change implementation as they play the most important role in determining how successful the entire effort to bring change is going to be (Coch, and French, 1948; Grusky and Miller, 1970; Bartlett and Kayser, 1973; Albanese, 1973; Eisen, et al., 1992).

It has come to the understanding while thoroughly looking at the subject and the context that it is not the change that people resist to but the uncertainty that is entailed with the change that adds to the fear of not being able to deal with the circumstances. In this regard, the resistance is not the basic problem that needs to be resolved upon understanding of the problem situation but what needs to be analyzed are the symptoms that arise from the situation and the context that give rise to the resistance. Resistance is a symptom which indicates that there is something wrong in the environment which is acting as a stimulus towards deviant behavior with regard to change implementation (Judson, 1966, p. 69; Bartlett and Kayser, 1972, p. 407).

Further on, psychologists with regard to change implementation have contributed towards the literature by suggesting that effective implementation of change requires that individuals be via communication or other managerial techniques motivated to accept and see the change as the management sees it. Because individuals have the tendency to be dissatisfied with an unfamiliar setting if they do not know why it is being undertaken and why they should be a part of it. Therefore, keeping the employees who are to be part of the change involved in the process and be communicated the objectives down to the techniques to be used to implement it of the change taking place in the organisation (Kaufman, 1971; Hultman, 1979; Janis, 1982; Ansoff, 1988; Leigh, 1988; Block, 1989; Bemmels and Reshef, 1991). Feeling part of the strategic process within the organisation, the employees feel motivated and encouraged to make the change happen effectively (Coch, and French, 1948; Grusky and Miller, 1970; Bartlett and Kayser, 1973; Albanese, 1973; Eisen, et al., 1992).

Where passive behavior is dominant in the organisation, change is often the most difficult to implement (Litterer, 1973, p. 152). However, with resistance, there exists the evidence that active behavior prevails in the organisation which wants to resolve the problem at
hand. With resistant behavior on part of the employees the management realizes that the employees have the energy in fact that is required to make the change happen along with the signal that their involvement and insights are necessary to be obtained to actually make the desired level of change happen and reduce the undesired deviant behavior. This energy is attempted to be converted into a source of motivation and diverted towards accepting change and making it happen. Therein the focus of the management has to be towards sustaining and establishing a balance between the level of resistance, stability, motivation and the energy required for the change (Thomas and Bennis, 1972, p. 383). This balanced stated is referred to as the “optimal level of motivation” that adds to the benefits of resistance as well as contributes positively towards the change management process.

Another important contribution of resistance is that it allows management to know which ideas are much more practical and applicable with regard to the organisation and its work place and which are not. This encourages the managers to come with alternatives and possible options along with contingency planning steps that ensure adaptability to the environment and maintaining the feasibility of the strategic decisions and the ideas being considered (Kaufman, 1971; Hultman, 1979; Janis, 1982; Ansoff, 1988; Leigh, 1988; Block, 1989; Bemmels and Reshef, 1991).

CONCLUSION

Literature no doubt presents multi-facet dimensions of the phenomenon of resistance to change where the majority of the conclusions have been traditionally drawn in the negative perspective. However, the contemporary management practice argues otherwise. Resistance is seen as a positive contributor and more as utility and blessing than as a curse as it aids in the effective management of change (Coch, and French, 1948; Grusky and Miller, 1970; Bartlett and Kayser, 1973; Albanese, 1973; Eisen, et al., 1992). Where steadiness is ideal for predicting of certain future performance, change is often also required so as to bring innovation in organisations for progress and growth. The challenge therein for the management is to balance the need for steadiness and constancy in the work place and practice while attempting to bring required and desired changes. It has been suggested and practiced that supportive and participative management with regard to change is the best approach that reduces the resistance as it involves the employees who are the source of the resistance. Employees being involved in the process inculcate a feeling of motivation and involvement that persists their need to resist the change and feel uncertain of the circumstance as they know what to expect, sharing the eyes of the management in this regard.
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