

## The Dynamics of Resistance to Change

by Katerina Faneli, Doctoral Candidate.



We approach resistance to change from the perspective of rational utility in maximizing the effectiveness of change management. Resistance in a planned change effort may lead to more efficient formulation and smoother implementation in an organization. Borrowing from Van de Ven and Poole's (1995) change motors, we view resistance during the implementation of planned change as a part of the dialectical motor, where conflict between opposing entities generate a dialectical cycle, which can be seen both as an inhibitor and a driver for change. Resistance as an expression of the thesis-in-use against the antithesis of a purposefully crafted thesis (planned change effort) can lead to a new synthesis that integrates both sides and thus eliminates their existence as separate phenomena competing for dominance. Hence, resistance is a true dynamic of change. Resistance is better than apathy as it engages people, provides alternative ideas, and promotes involvement of numerous stakeholders. Leaders of change need to engage others in the process to identify resistance in its various forms, and to test and hone change strategies and action plans, to enable a holistic and successful implementation of the change.

### The process of dialectics

Dialectics proposes that things change when there is a sufficient increase in quantity to produce a shift in quality. Conflicts emerge between entities espousing opposing theses and antitheses that collide to produce a synthesis, which in time becomes the thesis for the next cycle of a dialectical progression (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). This shift in quality configures a transition in which the first quality *becomes* a second quality that is different, but has its origins in the first quality (Ford, 1994). The idea of 'becoming' is possible because dialectics assumes that entities are unities of contradictions (thesis and antithesis) that continue to 'work at each other' until one dominates and there is a synthesis of them. Thesis and antithesis create synthesis which means that none of them continues to exist as a separate entity. Synthesis is a new body; the result of 'becoming' that comprises both thesis and antithesis and does not replace one entity with another as with formal logic (Ford, 1994). So to sum up, dialectics require the existence of two or more discrete entities that embody *opposition* in terms of forces or values. The dialectical motor emphasizes the importance of pluralism, confrontation and conflict between opposing interests as influencing factors on the unfolding of change (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005).

### Resistance as a dynamic force for efficient change management

Managers often realize resistance as negative reaction, since they see employees who resist as disobedient (Watson, 1982). But what can we actually learn about change management if resistance is treated as an essential element of change rather than something to be squashed?

If there is a value in resistance to change, then there is a high importance of successfully shaping it in the direction of the organizational needs. Resistance can offer a framework as a constructive response to the upper levels of organizations that conveys a message concerning real problems that exist and could be overcome in the change process being planned (Bryat, 2006). Several scholars (e.g., Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Dutton, Ashford, Werba, O'Neill, & Hayes, 1997) claim that resistance is a mean for the employees to draw the attention of top management to issues where the organization could improve in order to maintain or even improve performance.

As Waddell and Sohail (1998) point out resistance contributes to the change process as an input of energy and has many benefits for the organization. It is better than apathy or passivity and it provides alternative ideas for consideration (Mabin, et. al., 2001). Moreover, it promotes the importance of pluralism and creates the conditions for drawing attention to aspects of change that haven't been thought of or have been considered 'inappropriate' to tackle before. (Waddell, et al., 1998). In addition, it is commonly accepted that when a wider group of people is involved in the evaluation of alternatives the problems where managers have got stuck may be overcome faster and easier than anticipated (Mabin, et. al., 2001). So whenever resistance exists or emerges, the root causes of that resistance should be closely examined and their relation to the planned change analyzed in depth. Different methods may produce synthesis of the conflicting opinions and valuable insights may enable managers to manage change much more successfully (Dettmer, 1998; Houle & Burton-Houle, 1998; Waddell, et. al., 1998) by bringing resistance into the planning and execution process. When seen as something to be utilized, resistance can convert into a constructive tool for addressing particular organizational problems.

### Conclusion – rethinking resistance

Dialectical forces influence change efforts punctually during their unfolding, when the antithesis of change accumulates enough quantity of colliding forces to produce a conflict with the thesis in use. The extent to which various issues are attempted to be surfaced during the unfolding of the change effort determines its success. Constructive resistance should be seen as dynamic driver of change, and not only as a blockage. Part of the dialectical motor, it enables stakeholders to bring hidden issues to the agenda of transformation.

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