Resistance to change is a natural, healthy phenomenon which needs to be taken seriously.

**A Person-centred Approach to Dealing with Resistance to Change**

David Coghlan

Resistance is a label generally applied by managers and consultants to the perceived behaviour of organization members who seem unwilling to accept or help implement an organizational change. Herman (1990) sounds a cautious note in this regard:

There is a distinct possibility that the organisational development and training functions have been seduced by the “systems viewpoint”, and have lost sight of the importance of developing and training autonomous individuals (p. 13).

“Resistance” is used typically as a label by those who perceive themselves as agents of a change and may not be used by those who are the targets of the label. In this article, I will review some of the current approaches to understanding resistance to change and argue that the “person-centred approach” of Carl Rogers is a useful way of understanding and dealing with issues of individual resistance to organizational change.

**Sources of Individual Resistance to Organizational Change**

Watson (1969) defines resistance as “all forces which contribute to stability in personality or in social systems” (p. 488). Zaltman and Duncan (1977) provide a similar definition: “We define resistance here as any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo” (p. 63). In their view resistance may be caused by the change agents and may be justifiable in cases where the change may be harmful to individuals or to a group. It is useful to remember that every change involves some form of loss and letting go something that is familiar. Change requires going from the known to the unknown. It dissolves meaning and challenges assumptions which an individual has built up about himself or herself (Tannenbaum and Hanna, 1985).

What then are the sources of resistance to organizational change? Kotter and Schlesinger (1979) list the common sources: parochial self-interest, misunderstanding and lack of trust, different assessments of what change is needed and a low tolerance for change. An examination of their list shows that, in their view, the sources of resistance exist in both the personality and the environment.

In regard to sources of resistance in the personality, Watson (1969) describes nine sources of resistance to change: homeostasis (the body’s inbuilt regulating mechanism towards wholeness and stability); habit (whereby the familiar or routine is preferred); primacy (the way the individual first successfully coped and to which pattern the individual tends to return); selective perception and retention (once attitudes have been formed the individual responds to other suggestions from the framework of an established outlook); dependence (the effect of socialization and adoption towards an innovative or custodial response); illusion of impotence (feeling of helplessness or victim, perhaps through cognitive distortion); superego (Freudian concept of repressive constraints and taboos that set standards for the self, Parent in TA); self-distrust (cognitive distortion of self-guilt); insecurity and regression (nostalgic hanging on to the past). Identification of any individual’s particular issue with regard to a change is key to helping that individual cope.

Bennis (in Lippitt 1973) suggests six types of response which individuals may mobilize — oppose, resist, tolerate,
accept, support and embrace. The choice of these responses is affected by the degree of ambiguity of the change, the degree of control over the change and environment, the degree of trust in the change initiators, and the degree of intensity of search behaviour. These factors are in turn affected by the extent of information about the change, the degree of psychological participation in the change, and other factors, such as the individual’s acceptance of organizational culture and past experience of change. The individual’s response, according to Bennis, is based on perception and evaluation of the impact of the change, on a scale from self-destructive to self-enhancing.

The propensity to resist change is increased

As mentioned in the introduction, resistance is typically presented as a position on change from the perspective of those who are actively promoting the change. Klein (1969) takes the position of the defender and argues for a sensitivity towards the issues resisters present. In a similar vein, Nevis (1987) makes the point that the people resisting change in an organization are frequently high-powered members of the organization and that resistance is a creative source of energy. In his view, resistance has meaning only in the context of a power differential among people. Those with less power cannot easily say no to those who have more power. Accordingly, those with less power who are saying no are perceived as being resistant, much as a child saying no to an adult is perceived. The key solution, according to Nevis, is in how managerial authority and power are conceived and the role dissent, debate and disagreement plays in the dissemination of power and influence in decision making. Nevis also cautions against viewing resistance in terms of the emotional element only and emphasizes that the cognitive element must also be taken into account.

In the cognitive mode, Argyris (1990) grounds resistance to change in the psychological structure of organizations as low in openness, trust and risk taking, and high in conformity and mistrust, from which carefully built and brilliantly concealed defensive routines (what Argyris refers to as “fancy footwork”) are created. As managers propagate and build systems to maintain these defensive routines, the propensity to resist change is increased.

In summary:

(1) Resistance is a natural phenomenon; it is an essential element in understanding any change process.
(2) Resistance to change has its origins in both the personality and the individual’s interaction with the environment.
(3) Resistance is not passive, but is rather a dynamic energy.
(4) Resistance has both a cognitive and an emotional element.
(5) There are differing degrees of acceptance of change and resistance to it — from enthusiastic acceptance and co-operation through passive resignation, indifference, apathy, passive resistance to active and open opposition.
(6) Resistance is viewed generally from the perspective of those promoting change and there is need to understand resistance from the defenders’ position.
(7) Resistance should be taken seriously, by being listened to, understood and acted on; it is an occasion for the change agents to look again at the change project and review omissions or errors and modify it in the light of feedback.

Dealing with Resistance

Nevis (1987) argues that the starting-place for dealing with resistance is to consider it as a healthy, self-regulating manifestation which must be respected and taken seriously by managers and consultants.

If this is done, it leads to strategies and tactics for working with the resistance as opposed to trying to overcome or annihilate it. As indicated earlier, attempting to overpower, avoid, or eliminate it does not allow full awareness of the experience by either the initiator or the resistors. This is patronizing behaviour and is not respectful of the integrity of either party. To “ leap over” the resistance is to avoid the possibility of real insight or growth, and it precludes full ownership of the resistance. Even if the opposition forces are dissipated, the outcome is compliance, which may be alright in a coercive setting but is not a good, long-term, problem-solving, or educational model for the system involved (Nevis, 1987, p. 150).

Block (1981) recommends that the consultant listen carefully to the cues provided by the client, attempt some sort of conceptualization in his or her own mind as to what the resistance is, tentatively name it for the client and then listen to the client’s response. Such an approach facilitates uncovering of the many possible cognitive distortions which may exist in an individual, a team, a group or an organization (Coughlan and Rashford, 1990). Cognitive distortions are modes of thinking which are creations of the mind, rather than representative of reality. Because they are internalized
without being checked out, they are perceived as being true, and as a result reality is distorted. In situations of organizational change, particularly when there is an absence of adequate information, individuals who feel under threat or anxious typically can create their own interpretations of what others are thinking or intending, and of how they themselves are perceived or of what is likely to happen. If such perceptions are distortions and are not corrected, then resistance increases and takes on an added force which makes dealing with the issues more complex.

The Person-centred Approach

The principal task in the person-centred approach to the helping process, whether in psychotherapy, counselling or education, is the creation of a facilitative climate in which the client is able to effect constructive change (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990; Mearns and Thorne, 1988).

A facilitative climate is created...

The counsellor provides the conditions for self-exploration in a safe, trusting environment which provides the framework for self-initiated and self-directed reappraisal and modification of existing behaviours, attitudes, thought processes, values and habitual modes of coping.

The individual has within himself or herself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes and self-directed behavior — and that these resources can be tapped if only a desirable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided (Rogers in Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990, p. 135).

For Rogers, there are three conditions which constitute this growth-promoting climate:

1. genuineness, realness or congruence;
2. acceptance, caring or prizing — unconditional positive regard;
3. empathic understanding.

By congruence, Rogers means that the more the person in the helping role is himself or herself in the helping relationship and not putting up a professional façade the more the client is likely to change. The person in the helping role is in tune with his or her own feelings and there is congruence between what the helper is feeling and thinking and what is being expressed to the client. By acceptance or unconditional positive regard, Rogers is emphasizing a non-judgemental, non-possessive, accepting attitude towards how the client is at any given moment, so that the client feels safe to explore difficult personal issues. The third condition is empathy, by which Rogers means the quality of presence and listening by the person in the helping role, whereby he or she senses accurately the client's feelings and personal meanings, and is able to enter the client's inner world in such a way that the client experiences that the helper genuinely does understand. At the same time the person in the helping role remains outside the experience of the client. Rogers argues that these conditions are not only necessary to initiate constructive change but, when taken together, are sufficient to inaugurate that process (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1990).

A facilitative person can aid in releasing these capacities when relating as a real person to the other, owning and expressing her own feelings; when experiencing a non-possessive caring and love for the other; and when acceptantly understanding the inner world of the other. When this approach is made to an individual or group, it is discovered that, over time, the choices made, the directions pursued, the actions taken are increasingly constructive personally and tend towards a more realistic social harmony with others (Rogers, 1977, p. 15).

Rogers (1961) reflects on the therapeutic process and articulates seven stages through which the process appears to pass. Over the seven stages the movement from the early to the late stages is described by Rogers in the following terms. In the early stages, there is an unwillingness in the client to discuss self; communication is only about externals. Feelings and personal meanings are neither recognized nor owned and there is little or no desire to change. There is no sense of personal responsibility with regard to problems. Experiencing and feelings are related to the past. Inconsistencies and contradictions are not recognized. There is little acceptance of feelings; they are revealed as shameful, abnormal and unacceptable. In the later stages, there is an increasingly clear facing of contradictions and incongruencies in experience. Feelings are accepted in the immediate and not feared. There is little acceptance of feelings; they are revealed as shameful, abnormal and unacceptable. In the later stages, there is an increasing acceptance of self-responsibility for the problems being faced. Internal communication is free and relatively unblocked.

The Person-centred Approach to Dealing with Resistance

The person-centred approach places great emphasis on setting a facilitative climate whereby the client experiences non-judgemental listening and empathy from the consultant.
Listening to the client involves hearing the client’s feelings and personal meanings. Feelings may include those of anxiety, anger, being misunderstood, under threat, oppressed or depressed, while the personal meanings provide the interpretations that the client is putting on events. The client may be interpreting the change in self-destructive terms, which may be factually true or a distortion. The change may be misunderstood or seen from a narrow perspective. The groups with which the individual identifies may be the source of the individual’s perspective, and the client may be helped to assess that perspective.

通过促进的过程，人本主义方法帮助客户倾听自己的感受，接受它们并且自己决定做什么。客户也可能被帮助识别具体的议题，并决定自己的立场。这个过程并不意味着每个人最终会顺从改变者的愿望和议程。作为人本主义方法结果的自主行为，客户可能选择继续抗拒改变，这种抗拒是出于自由意志，而不是反应。在这种情况下，改变者需要重新审视他们的议程。

Margerison (1988) 引用 Rogers 的方法作为处理抗拒时特别有用，让人们有机会反思过去的经历，现在的位置以及未来的方向，从而使得个人对自己的行动有动机。

Rogers 一生都在努力对抗人本主义方法被认为是一种技术的观点，能够用来达到特定的目的。对他来说，人本主义方法是一种‘存在方式’，基于上述的哲学前提，特别是在真诚性作为助人者的核心角色。因此，咨询者，从人本主义视角出发，必须真诚地在帮助客户回应改变时。没有真诚的人本主义方法会排除任何企图使用它作为努力来操纵人们去接受改变。

结论

在这篇文章中，当今对组织中改变抗拒的现代视角被概述，这表明改变的抗拒是一个自然和健康的现象，基于情况和个人因素 (Bunker and DeLisle, 1991)。改变的抗拒必须得到认真对待和关注，因为这是所有组织成员应有的尊重。改变的抗拒为改变者提供了内容和过程方面的进一步数据，并构成了重新审视它们的邀请。忽视在改变中提出的问题和努力去否认、压倒和强迫，会增加抗拒，特别是在长期。

人本主义方法使我改变

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