

Managing Change: Why Do Individuals and Organizations Resist It?

It is well documented that individuals and organizations naturally resist change even when it is in their best interest! It is perhaps this psychological dynamic, above all others, that intrigued and led me into the study of psychology.

Why do we resist change? There are three main reasons:

1. Human beings are habitual. Cognitive psychologists estimate that the average individual has over 60,000 thoughts per day. These thoughts are responsible for driving how we feel and what we do. And here is the rub! Cognitive psychologists also estimate that 80-85% of those 60,000 thoughts are the same thoughts we had yesterday! Our habits are driven by deeply ingrained thought patterns. This makes change very difficult. Even when we know we need to change, it is difficult without good strategies for changing ingrained ways of thinking. Organizations develop ingrained "perceptual styles" just as individuals do!
2. Security is the number one human value. Above all else, we seek to feel safe and secure; physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Any unfamiliar change elicits fear. Managing change successfully is all about anticipating those fears and working through them.
3. Most organizations are naturally conservative. We only develop feelings of safety through multiple positive encounters. Great leaders have the instinct for optimizing the trust and security their followers need, in order to successfully let go of fear.

So, what can be done to reduce the resistance to change? The most important tools in a leader's toolbox to manage change are vision and participation. It is difficult for individuals to maintain their fears and resistance to change when they are included in the development of the vision and/or the decisions which drive the change. When a culture is driven by a clear vision and core values, and its members are encouraged to participate in the decision-making process, fear is dramatically reduced.

If you are in the process of developing an organizational vision and mission, be sure to include methods that allow everyone's voice to be heard. Once the vision and mission are established, continue to develop methods to ensure that employees will be heard. Such methods might include mentoring programs that recognize and reward innovative ideas. I've helped many organizations develop customized mentoring programs that facilitate trust and cooperation, and dramatically reduce resistance to change.

Managing change is perhaps the most challenging psychological puzzle facing business owners. It can be comforting to know that successfully managing change doesn't require going it alone. The more you involve employees in the change process, the easier it becomes to reduce fear and facilitate productive growth and change.