

Why People Resist Change

There are a number of reasons why many of us dislike change. The following speak to many of them.

1. The Change isn't self-initiated.

When people lack ownership of an idea, they usually resist it, even when it is in their best interest. They simply don't like the idea of being manipulated or feeling like pawns of the system. Wise leaders allow followers to give input and be a part of the process of change.

2. Routine is disrupted.

Habits allow us to do things without thought, which is why most of us have so many of them. Habits are not instincts. They are acquired reactions. They don't just happen; they are caused. First we form habits, but then our habits form us. Change threatens our habit patterns and forces us to think, reevaluate, and sometimes unlearn past behavior. When people learn something new that they like they will more readily be open to also forming new habits.

3. Change creates fear of the unknown.

Change means traveling in uncharted waters, and this causes our insecurities to rise. Therefore, many people are more comfortable with old problems. The change needs to be much better than the current problem.

4. The purpose of the change is unclear.

Employees resist change when they hear about it from a secondhand source. When a decision has been made, the longer it takes for employees to hear and further the desired change is from the decision-maker, the more resistance it will receive. That's why decisions should be made at the lowest level possible. The decision-maker, because of proximity to the issue, will make a better decision, and those most affected by the decision will know it quickly by hearing it from a source close to them and to the problem.

5. Change creates fear of failure.

Too many people, fearing that failure is their thing, hold tenaciously to whatever they feel comfortable with and continually resist change.

6. The rewards for change don't match the effort change requires.

People will not change until they perceive that the advantages of changing outweigh the disadvantages of continuing with the way things are. What leaders sometimes fail to recognize is that the followers will always weigh the advantage/disadvantage issue in light of personal gain/loss, not organizational gain/loss.

7. People are too satisfied with the way things are.

In the 1940's the Swiss watch was the most prestigious and best quality watch in the world. Consequently 80 percent of the watches sold in the world were made in Switzerland. In the late 50's the digital watch was presented to the leaders of the Swiss watch company. They rejected this new idea because they knew they already had the best watch and the best watch makers. The man who had developed the digital watch subsequently sold the idea to Seiko.

In 1940 Swiss watch-making companies employed eighty thousand people. In the 1990's they employed eighteen thousand. In 1940, 80 percent of the watches sold in the world were made in Switzerland. In the 1990's 80 percent of the watches were digital. The story represents what happens to many organizations and people: We choose to die rather than choose to change.

8. Change won't happen when people engage in negative thinking.

Regardless of his state in the present, the negative thinker finds disappointment in the future. The epitaph on a negative person's headstone should read, "I expected this." This type of thinking can best be described by a sign I read several years ago in an office building:

Don't look – you might see.
Don't listen – you might hear.
Don't think – you might learn
Don't make a decision – you might be wrong.
Don't walk – you might stumble
Don't run – you might fall.
Don't live – you might die.

9. The followers lack respect for the leader.

When followers don't like the leader who oversees the change, their feelings won't allow them to look at the change objectively. In other words, people view the change according to the way they view the change-agent.

One of the principles I share in leadership conferences is "You've to love 'em before you can lead them." When you your followers genuinely and correctly, they'll respect and follow you though many changes.

10. The leader is susceptible to feelings of personal criticism

Sometimes leaders resist change. For example, if a leader has developed a program that is now being phased out for something better, he or she may feel the change is a personal attack and will react defensively.

11. Change may mean personal loss.

Whenever change is imminent, the question on everyone's mind is, "how will this affect me?" Usually there are three groups of people within the organization: (1) those who will lose; (2) those people who are neutral; and (3) those who will benefit. Each group is different and must be handled with sensitivity, but also with straightforwardness.

12. Change requires additional commitment.

Time is the most precious commodity for many people. Whenever change is about to happen, we will look to see how it will affect our time. Usually we conclude that increased change will be fine if it does not increase our time commitment. Sidney Howard said that one-half of knowing what you want is knowing what you must give up before you get it. When the cost of change is time, many will resist the change.

13. Narrow-mindedness thwarts acceptance of new ideas

Sixteen hundred people belong to the International Flat Earth Research Society of America. Their president, Charles K. Johnson, says he's been a flat-earthier all his life. "When I saw the globe in grade school I didn't accept it then and I don't accept it now."

That reminds me of the man who lived in Maine and turned one hundred years of age. A reporter drove up from New York City to interview the old man. Sitting on the front porch, the reporter said, "I'll bet you've seen a lot of change in your lifetime." The Old man replied, "Yes, and I've been again' every one of them."

14. Tradition resists change.

Cornfield's Law says that nothing is ever done until everybody is convinced that it ought to be done, and has been convinced for so long that it is now times to do something else.

The above information comes from John Maxwell's book *Developing the Leader Within You*.

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