CHAPTER 4

Overcoming Resistance

"But, oh! the heavy change, now thou art gone,
Now thou art gone, and never must return!"
— John Milton

When is the last time you experienced a major change in your personal life? Think about what you went through emotionally during that period. Over the past 18 months, at the tender age of 47, I moved from Columbia, South Carolina, to Atlanta as a single parent with three school-age children; started a new, very challenging job; experienced the death of one of my parents; sent my daughter off to college for the first time; and met the love of my life, got married, and merged families that involved blending a total of four teenage boys and four cats into one household. It was a set of experiences that easily measured 9.8 on the Richter scale. And, yes, there are continuing aftershocks! I believe I am pretty adaptive and open to change. But this level of change is intense, and I find myself having to work very hard to make the appropriate adjustments. Getting older doesn’t help, either. Certainly, I have more maturity than I had 15 years ago, but my aversion to risk is growing while my energy level is declining. Fortunately, almost all the changes I experienced were for the better. Therefore, it was helpful to keep myself focused on a positive vision of where I was heading. Still, it was very challenging emotionally.

It occurs to me that my personal experience is analogous to what happens to many people in their work environments. Different issues, obviously, but the quantity and depth of change are similar to what a number of organizations have experienced over the past few years.

Case in point: Recently, a technician from Comcast, the cable company that serves our neighborhood, came to my house. I had enrolled in its new service that provided cable access for high-speed Internet connectivity and the system went down. The tech support
over the phone didn’t solve the problem, so I requested a service call. Lewis, the technician, was wearing an AT&T emblem on his shirt when I opened the door. It startled me a bit, as I couldn’t imagine why an AT&T repairman was at the house. When I asked why he was wearing that shirt, Lewis replied that AT&T had acquired Comcast just a few days ago. He was not particularly pleased with that outcome, as he had purposely chosen to work for a small, somewhat entrepreneurial company. Now, beyond his control, Lewis was part of the huge AT&T global corporation. He also was working in a technical area that was new to him. The cable company had just started offering the Internet connectivity service, and Lewis had to be retrained in order to provide technical support to his customers. He did not seem to be overly stressed about the changes, “but it’s a lot to deal with,” as Lewis so aptly stated. The aura of resignation to the powers of fate, more than a sense of tension, was most striking to me about Lewis’s reactions to his work situation. It made me wonder what I could do to help him if I were his manager. What would you do?

To answer that question it is important to understand both why people resist change and what is the likely range of behavioral consequences of that resistance. Here is my list of reasons why resistance to change is so prevalent in the workplace:

- **Fear of the unknown.** The basic human need to achieve comfort in one’s environment has already been discussed. Change implies uncertainty, and uncertainty is uncomfortable. Not knowing what may potentially happen often leads to heightened anxiety. Most people will do whatever they can to reduce their levels of anxiety. Resisting change is one of these anxiety-reducing actions.

- **Fear of failure.** The new order may require skills and abilities that are beyond our capabilities. Since we know how to operate in the existing order, there is resistance to trying a new approach. We may fail. When word processing first came into the workplace, most secretaries were adamantly resistant. They saw no reason to learn how to use a computer when they were very efficient in using the typewriter. Would anyone go back to typewriters now? But the fear of
not being able to learn the new technology generated a lot of resistance to giving up traditional typing at the time.

- Not understanding the need for change. This concern is related to the expression “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” that was previously mentioned. A common perspective among associates in companies that are facing sudden, significant change is the lack of a felt need for the change. “We’ve been successful going the way we’ve been going, so why do we suddenly need to follow a very different path?” is the frequently asked question.

- Disagreement with the need for change. A closely related factor that causes resistance to change is the feeling among associates that the new direction is the wrong direction. It’s not that they don’t understand the reasoning behind the changes, but rather that they believe the reasoning is flawed. This is particularly commonplace in organizations that have generated high levels of skepticism from a track record of frequent and ineffective change initiatives. Total quality, continuous process improvement, self-directed work teams, and learning organizations are all buzzwords that became synonymous with “program of the month” at many companies across the country. The decisions made to pursue any of these movements often lacked total commitment, were poorly thought out and wound up being ineffectively implemented. I recall talking with one manufacturing associate who was describing his displeasure at the new total quality management program that his company was initiating—“this, too, shall pass” was his parting comment. It was clear to me that he was never going to invest any energy or effort in the TQM program. And lacking clear reasoning for why he should, or how the company was going to be fully committed to the effort, why should he buy into the change process?

- Losing something of value. Ultimately it will come down to the infamous acronym WIJFM (what’s in it for me?). You can talk all you want to about the strategic imperatives and the complexities of doing business in the global environ-
ment, but all that associates really want to know is how the change will affect them. If you do not communicate to them at that level, you will never get them to buy in. If people believe they will wind up losing as a result of the change, they will resist. The more significant the perceived loss, the more vigorous the resistance. Imagine a VP who has been with the company for 20 years and just recently made it to the executive level where he runs a major division. In the new restructuring plan, this division is dissolved and winds up being spread among various other business units. What type of resistance would you anticipate from the VP? Given his positional power, imagine how influential that resistance could be to undermining the change initiative.

- **Inertia.** Don’t underestimate the power of fatigue and burnout. Change requires effort. Oftentimes, it requires significant effort. And aging takes its toll on our desire and energy reserves. Sometimes you can fully understand the need for change, believe that it is the right thing to do for the company, see your potential gain, and know that you could do it well—if only you had it in you to try it one more time. All things being equal, people will choose the path of least resistance if they are provided with the option. And that path would lead to not putting forth the effort to change. We all have our limits for how much change we can bear, and many people are close to, or over, their limit.

Let’s go back to the cable technician, Lewis. Which factors might influence his resistance to change? It didn’t appear to me that he has a fear of failure even though he is supporting a new technology. Nor can I imagine the issues of not understanding the need for change, or disagreeing with the need for change, to be operating on him. However, Lewis showed me signs of fearing the unknown as he talked about his concerns about working for a large corporation. Similarly, he probably is worried about losing something of value in this switch—with the loss being less control of his destiny and having less of a presence in an organization the size of AT&T.

The question posed was how could we help Lewis feel more comfortable with this change and be a more satisfied, motivated
employee? The answer lies in the strategies that can be employed to overcome the various forms of resistance to change. Once there is an understanding of where an individual’s resistance comes from, it is possible to work through the resistance. Here are some techniques you can apply for each of the major factors described above.

FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

The best approach to overcome fear of the unknown is to help the person envision a positive future. You may not be able to paint a complete picture of where the organization is headed, but you should at least be able to articulate a vision of the direction in which the company is going. The main point is to communicate that the new direction is the right direction—and that if the company just stayed on the old path, it would eventually lead to serious decline. For Lewis, I would talk with him about the realities of a small company remaining small amidst all the consolidation in the telecommunications industry. It would be highly unlikely that Comcast could remain independent, and therefore it was good that a solid firm, such as AT&T, was the acquirer. Clearly, the company wants to be a major player in the cable and broadband sectors of the telecom industry and has the resources to do so.

FEAR OF FAILURE

In addressing concerns over the fear of failure, it is important to help individuals develop confidence that they will fit into the new order. In this context, it is particularly important to be encouraging and positive rather than authoritarian (the “my way or the highway” approach). No one should expect to be highly effective right away when working in a new situation. Everyone needs to climb the learning curve—some just do it faster than others, but most people are capable of getting there eventually. Statements that indicate patience with their initial limited success, show support for their continuing learning, and express confidence in their ability to perform are all important in helping people overcome their anxieties at work. Training and development initiatives are excellent tactics to utilize to demonstrate the company’s willingness to
invest in their associates' learning what they need to learn to be effective in the new environment.

NOT UNDERSTANDING THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Communication is the key to overcoming the resistance generated by a lack of understanding the need for change. Here it is important to assess the individual's preferred communications style, if you are working with just one person. Does the individual respond better to a rational-logical argument that analyzes the pros and cons of change? Or is this someone who reacts better to passionate discourse with an emphasis on the emotional side of the need for change? If you are going to be meeting with a group, you would want to make a similar assessment and try to determine which style was more at play with the members. If the balance is close to 50-50, you should design your presentation to cover both perspectives—the rational and the emotional components. Not understanding the need for change is the predominant reason for resistance to change in larger organizations. What appears obvious in the executive suite regarding the compelling reasons to change does not make its way down to the ground level very effectively. And when the top-down communications strategy is built around emails that announce changes rather than face-to-face dialogs that focus on the reasons for changing, there is a serious disconnect across organizational levels.

This lack of understanding that results from poor communication down the organization is so common that it is the most serious barrier to effective change management in corporations today. You have to make sure you are communicating the need for change in a way the person can understand it, which could be very different from the way you understand it. This is why supervisors or frontline managers play such a critical role in organizational transformation. They are the lynchpin between management and employees. Supervisors speak the language that employees can understand; after all, most of them were formerly hourly associates who were promoted to supervisory roles. Managers typically don't speak this language and therefore are not effective in their com-
munications about change. If you want the nonexempt employees to understand the reasons behind a major change initiative, you must focus attention on the frontline supervisors. They will be the key to getting the message down the chain.

Case in point: The Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) was experiencing a time of enormous change in the mid-nineties. The whole health-care industry was in the midst of a revolution, but public hospitals were even more under duress. Columbia HCA was gobbling up hospitals across the country, and it had set its sights on the hospital that was affiliated with MUSC. Negotiations were under way to "sell" the hospital (not the medical school) to Columbia HCA. Just a few months prior to the beginning of these negotiations, MUSC had experienced its first-ever reduction in force due to significant budgetary distress. Employee morale was sinking fast. The hospital was based in Charleston, and most of the employee population came from impoverished, minority communities in surrounding townships that have traditionally served the wealthy Charlestonian society. Employees felt a strong sense of distrust of those in power, as well as an intense feeling of entitlement as public employees of the state of South Carolina that their jobs should be completely secure. While the negotiations with HCA were going on, rumors were flying throughout the hospital that many jobs would be eliminated and that everyone would suffer from pay cuts or loss of benefits. As you might imagine, patient care was suffering as a result of the high levels of organizational distress.

Adding to its woes, MUSC was trying to create multidisciplinary teams to help provide higher-quality service while more effectively leveraging its resources. Its competitors were moving fast in creating community-based delivery systems that were more responsive to the unique needs of the local citizens. It was clear to the hospital's administrators that they had to change the way they thought about delivering medical care, treating patients, and managing their human and capital assets. Initial efforts to build cooperation across clinics and to improve customer satisfaction ratings from patients were completely ineffective. Hal, one of the senior administrators, came to the realization that the ongoing negotiations with HCA were paralyzing the organization. The employees'
inability to understand what was going on, why all these changes were being made, and what the impact would be on them created a highly dysfunctional atmosphere that prevented any and all progress on their other initiatives. Hal came up with a communications strategy that focused on the midlevel managers and supervisors—a group that predominantly consisted of the nurses who ran the clinics and managed the work force. He figured that by making sure these managers were fully informed about what was happening, they would be the key to communicating the information accurately to the employees. Hal convinced the other senior administrators to hold weekly “communications meetings.” Every Tuesday afternoon, from 2 to 3 o’clock, members of the senior team met with all 50+ midlevel managers and supervisors in the auditorium. The members of the senior team provided updates at the beginning of each meeting, sharing the latest information they could regarding the potential merger. Many times, there was information that could not be provided, as it would have been in violation of the rules for the negotiations. At these times, the senior group would tell the managers what little news they could share and explain why they could not say more. Then, they would open the floor for questions, and they urged the managers to raise questions they were hearing from the employees.

It was not easy to schedule everyone at a set time each week, but the meetings became so important that everyone made a commitment to be there. Many of the managers and senior administrators point to the beginning of those weekly communications meetings as the key turning point in the struggling change process. Eventually the negotiations with HCA were terminated, as the state legislature decided not to approve the merger. However, the effort put into the communications meetings had a long-lasting positive impact on the organization.

**DISAGREEMENT WITH THE NEED FOR CHANGE**

When people’s resistance to change is driven by their disagreeing with the need for change, or with the direction the change represents, it is important to make sure they feel their concerns are
heard. Listening is the principal tactic to employ. Most people just want to be listened to—to believe their opinion matters and that someone in authority cares enough to hear them out. There is no harm in giving them that opportunity. First of all, you might learn something you didn’t know. Perhaps, they have information you don’t have. And they may provide you with clues about how others might be thinking. Finally, listening helps to build trust, and you will need to gain their trust as the change process unfolds. The downside to letting people ventilate is that it is time-consuming and potentially irritating. For those who continue to insist that the company is wrong in moving in the new direction, you eventually have to help them come to a decision. You can acknowledge that their view is understandable but then firmly point out that the company has made its decision and it is time to either get on board with it or leave the organization. The individuals who disagree don’t have to be convinced that they are wrong, only that they need to support the decision that has been made.

LOSING SOMETHING OF VALUE

To address people’s resistance to change due to the perception that they are losing something of value, you must first be honest. They may be right, and to attempt to persuade them that they are not losing anything does nothing but destroy your credibility. They will stop listening and continue resisting. It is important to try to determine what is being lost—money, power, job security? Then, acknowledge their notion of loss, but try to help the individuals see the issue from a different perspective. Perhaps the loss would be greater if they continued resisting. And help them think about what they have to gain from becoming a positive part of the change process rather than a detriment. During the period when many manufacturing companies were changing from traditional shifts to team-based processes, supervisors saw themselves as the ones with the most to lose. The traditional role of the supervisor is to tell the hourly associates what to do—a command-and-control style was predominant. After all, the supervisors had been hourly associates themselves and had been told what to do by their supervisors. Now when it was finally their turn to be in command, the company
decided to switch to team-based activities. Instead of the supervisor telling the associates what to do, the team members were charged with deciding the assignments. Team members did the hiring, discipline, and firing in many circumstances. The supervisory role shifted from authoritarian to team facilitator. As a result most supervisors felt that the use of work teams was simply a way to get rid of them without doing so directly. Once the teams learned how to manage themselves, supervisors were redundant (or so the supervisors thought).

I found this attitude prevalent among a group of supervisors in a plant I was assisting to develop a team-based approach to their processes. It was clear that most of the supervisors were scared about losing their jobs and convinced that the whole initiative was specifically designed to make them quit rather than be fired. Over the course of several conversations, I learned that in addition to their fear of losing something of value (their jobs!), most of the supervisors were also afraid of failing as team facilitators. They knew how to be supervisors, in the traditional sense, but they didn’t have a clue of how to be effective team leaders.

I counseled the plant manager to meet with the supervisors one-on-one to discuss the reasons behind the change process and to explain how important their contribution was to its overall success. The supervisors were informed that they would in no way lose their jobs if they were positive contributors and proponents of the team approach. Then the HR manager followed up and explained that the supervisors would be receiving comprehensive training in how to facilitate work teams to help them develop the necessary skills to be successful. It was also pointed out to each supervisor that the world of work had changed in most manufacturing facilities across the country. A lot of companies were developing team-based organizations, and so it would be very beneficial to each of the supervisors to learn how to be effective team leaders. Even if they left the company, it would make them much more marketable if they ever wanted to find another job in manufacturing. Most of the supervisors understood the situation and committed themselves to becoming good team leaders. The few who did not see the light were ineffective and were eventually let go by the company. While they undoubtedly blamed their terminations on the change
process, it was their own resistance and inflexibility that caused them to lose their jobs.

Go back to Lewis, the cable technician, who also thought he would be losing something of value with AT&T’s acquisition of Comcast. He’s right to be concerned that size could add layers of bureaucracy to his organization, but what might he be gaining? AT&T will be able to offer him more extensive technical training. Since it is a much larger company, there are many more opportunities for career growth and options to transfer to new positions or new locations. And AT&T has a greater brand name than Comcast Communications, so it will carry more weight on his résumé should Lewis ever look for a new job with another company. In this instance, he stands to gain a lot more than he stands to lose.

INERTIA

There is no one best way to overcome the influence of inertia as a force of resistance to change. However, it is clear that the amount of energy and enthusiasm that you bring to the office will have a tremendous influence on your associates’ attitudes. Hard-core cynicism is built up from years of bad experiences, and it is very difficult to overcome it in one leap. The best you might hope for is to help someone become less cynical and thus less cancerous in the organization for everyone else’s benefit. But if you do not demonstrate energetic support for the change effort, do not expect your subordinates to do so. They learn from you and are heavily influenced by your actions—however unfair that might sound.

I vividly remember one manager who was an actuary in a major insurance company. David had been working at the firm for over 25 years and was clearly in the twilight of his career. He had a wealth of knowledge about the company and the industry, but he had become very cynical over the past five years—so much so that a job was created for David that kept him isolated from most others in the firm. Of course, this made him even more cynical. Why he continued to work with the company, or why the company hadn’t asked him to retire, is still beyond me. It was an organization that had a strong nonconfrontational culture. All the battles fought inside were done covertly, never openly. And David struck me as
someone who was very driven by comfort—he had become comfortable playing the cynic role, and he was undoubtedly afraid to try something new. Then, the company decided it needed to dramatically change its culture—to be more open, supportive, and empowering. David did not buy into it at all. While he agreed with those values, he did not believe that the company’s leadership was seriously committed to changing the status quo. David was assigned to attend one of the first one-week leadership development programs I designed to support this change initiative. He started the program with a poor attitude, but when he saw the sincere commitment to change among a number of the members of the senior leadership team, David’s perspective began to change. By the last session of the week, David showed tremendous progress. Several of his peers noticed the change in his behavior and told him how much they wanted him to become a contributing member of the organization again. It was a very meaningful week to David and one that propelled him to finish his time at the company in a much more productive and gratifying way.

One part of being an effective change agent is to take more of a proactive stance to minimize the impact that resistance carries. David would have not become quite so cynical if he had felt more a part of the organization’s new direction than an outcast whose opinions were unimportant. There are ways to promote acceptance to change, especially for those who have Theory Y leanings. Here are a few proactive tactics that should assist you in gaining buy-in:

1. Bring people in early. The longer you wait to discuss the need for change with associates, the more they will distrust what you are doing to them. View this as an ongoing series of dialogs rather than a finished product you are delivering to the staff. Change is a continuous process, and everyone should feel a part of what is happening.

2. If you are coming into your organization as a new manager, take a little time to assess the current situation and then set up an aggressive timetable for making major changes. The longer you wait to break the status quo, the more resistant people will become to change. On the other hand, making sudden dramatic changes without having spent
any time understanding the organizational dynamics is unwise. This limits your credibility with the associates, as they will believe that you have your own agenda and that you are inclined to act first and ask questions later.

3. Identify the individuals who are most receptive to change. Start with the people who are most likely to respond positively to operating differently and help them to demonstrate success. If you spend all your energy on the heavy resistors, you won't have any left for the associates who are ready to change. This will turn off your best potential internal advocates.

4. Avoid bashing the way things have been done in the past. This is an easy trap to fall into, especially if you are taking over a unit that has been struggling. If you are too critical of the ways in which the unit has been functioning, you are denigrating the staff. As you get started, find a way to acknowledge that the way things were done in the past was probably appropriate for the situation at that time. Then help the associates to see that the future will require new practices and keep their attention focused forward, not backward.

5. In similar fashion, be careful not to talk a lot about the way you did things in your previous position. It is very irritating to listen to someone constantly saying things like “Well, when I was in sales, we did things this way.” The typical reaction people have to this type of comment is “Why don’t you go back to sales if it was such a better place?” A different way to make your point, without aggravating your associates, is to say “From my experiences, I have learned that...”

6. Get everyone involved in creating the new organization. There are two ingredients to keep in mind when pushing for change: the quality of the decision made about how to do things differently and the commitment people will have to execute that decision. The chances are high that you will be more concerned with implementation than with finding the one best answer. For example, make sure the people
who have to execute a new process are the ones helping to design it. Their ownership over the change will increase exponentially the more they believe they have control over the change. If you are concerned that your associates are incapable of coming up with an improved process, help them to learn how to do it. I have facilitated process reengineering sessions in organizations both to fix a specific process and to teach them a framework for addressing process improvement in the future.

A very important element in the change process is to build trust among the associates rather than destroy it. The more the associates feel respected and integrated into the new order, the more they will embrace change. These simple steps can help you build trust if you act with sincerity.
QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

- Consider a time when you were resistant to a change at work. What were the circumstances? Why were you resisting? What was the outcome?

- If your organization is currently undergoing change, see the change matrix illustrated in Figure 4.1. Where does your company fall in the matrix—is resistance to change high or low? How fast must change occur for the organization to succeed?

- Identify the change management strategy most appropriate for where your organization falls in this matrix. How could you use this to help promote effective change in your part of the organization?

Figure 4.1
Organizational change matrix.

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<tr>
<th>Receptivity to Change</th>
<th>Time Pressure for Change</th>
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<td>low</td>
<td>educational (felt need)</td>
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