

Academia

Understanding the Resistance to Change Within the Hospitality Industry

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Frustrating, painful, draining, scary, exciting, unsettling, and exhausting are some of the words people, who are on the receiving side of change, use to describe their experience. It is a highly [personal and emotional experience](#) for most of us. Now imagine needing to serve guests cheerfully in a hospitality setting while you are experiencing these negative emotions. As a result, the toll change takes on hospitality professionals is greater than for most other industries.

It is, therefore, critical that we understand the resistance to change as well as, have a plan to convert the "resistance" to "commitment" towards change.

Dr. Singh

Hospitality is one of the oldest industries and yet, not much has changed with regards to how we serve our guests since the time of inn-keeping. Yet, we all acknowledge the need to innovate, evolve and respond to the changing guest tastes. Prolific brands, constantly changing technology, shifting guest service culture and evolving customer expectations, all require that we build a workforce that is accustomed to a culture of constant change and innovation.

David Garvin and Amy Edmondson would call such an organization, [a learning organization](#). However, building such an organization requires that we build commitment to change into our DNA. This requires a deeper understanding of why people resist change.

The resistance to change may sometimes be passive, where individuals do not actively support change by procrastinating. As a result, slowing the change process and hoping the change effort fails. Active resistance on the other involves individuals being more vocal against change, as well as, involves individuals engaging in behaviors that are meant to derail the change process. Whether active or passive, according to Rick Maurer (the resistance to change usually stems from three top reasons-they don't get it, they don't like it or they don't like you)

"I Don't Get It"

How can one support something they do not understand? While those of us closely working on the required changes and its implementation are familiar with the need for change and what it may require, we often fail to realize that it may not be as simplistic or easy for others to grasp. Change creates a lot of uncertainty. Depending on the scope and scale of change it may sometimes mean that the world as we know it may not be the same.

This is, especially the case if the change is radical and fast paced. We all like familiarity. Familiar gives us comfort by way of telling us that things are the way they are supposed to be. It is, therefore, important to help people understand why things should not be the way they were.

For example, when the leadership at Kodak decided to move away from traditional film cameras towards digital technology in 2003 its shareholders as well as employees failed to understand why they had to forego their dividend or current way of doing things (Palmer, Dunford, & Akin, 2009), respectively. It was not clear to them why a company that had done so well for decades in the business of traditional film cameras had to suddenly change course. As a result, the lack of support from various stakeholders ensured that Kodak was unable to keep pace with the market and lose its position in an industry it once led.

What Can Change Leaders Do?

Building a strong case for why change is necessary and clearly communicating what it would involve is most critical to ensure that people do not resist change because they do not understand it. Especially, if the change is radical and fast paced, creating a sense of urgency for the change is the key. Being prepared to answer questions such as,

why is the change required? Who will it effect? How long will it take?, would be an important part of creating that sense of urgency.

Most importantly, involving everyone who will be affected by change not only creates clarity about change it also ensures that teams are not engaging in sense making based on incomplete or incorrect information, leading them to wrong conclusions. Communicate, communicate, communicate.

"I Don't Like It"

The reason most of us do not like change is emotional. As mentioned earlier, change creates strong emotional reactions in individuals as well as team. Firstly, the uncertainty created by change generates fear of loosing their job or having to deal with the new (role, culture, people etc.) that they may not be familiar with. Secondly, individuals experience a sense of helplessness as they feel they are unable to control their circumstances, environment and as a result, outcomes.

Finally, humans are creatures of habit and we tend to like our routines and rhythms. These routines give us a sense of comfort. We not only get attached to the people and environments, we also get attached to the routines. As a result, letting go of these routines gives us a sense of loss and grief.

For example, in the case of Kodak, while the shareholders were resistant to the change for financial reasons, the employees were possibly fearing losing their world as they knew it. It is likely they feared not fitting into the digital future for lack of skills. Those staying on would also have to deal with loosing colleagues, they had worked with for years, to layoffs. Finally, despite the resistance it is likely the employees knew that the change was inevitable, and it gave them a sense of helplessness.

What Can Change Leaders Do?

The biggest fear that haunts the workforce with regards to change is the fear of losing their job. Change agents need to ensure that all the decisions relating to retention and layoffs are made based on an open, fair and objective criterion (giving people a sense of fairness) in a participative way (giving people a sense of control), and communicated openly as early as possible (reducing the uncertainty people experience). Additionally, providing the necessary training as well as emotional support is critical to making sure people are more open to change.

"I Don't Like You"

The person who introduces the change or is seen as the face of the change in an organization is as important as the communication required to introduce the change. Employees do not like any new ideas or changes introduced by someone they do not like, know, understand and most importantly, trust. As a result, any change introduced by a new leader who is yet to establish trust within the organization may be equated to an invasion and the leader, an invader.

Trusting the individual or parties that propose the change is essential for employees to show openness or commitment to the change effort. Trust in a person shows that we believe that the person in question will make decisions that are in our best interest (integrity based trust) and that this person is capable of doing all that they say they intend to do (competency based trust).

Right after Carly Fiorina joined HP in 1999, she introduced several well-needed structural and cultural changes to the organization(Palmer et al., 2009). Even though timely and much needed, some of these changes were not widely accepted by the HP team. The subsequent merger with Compaq in 2002 that was led by Fiorina met a lot of resistance. Despite her best efforts, Fiorina failed to win over the disgruntled employees post-merger.

Subsequently, Fiorina was ousted in 2005 and most of the structural changes she made were undone by the new CEO. While the board had other reasons to resist the merger, the employees who were still unhappy about the changes led by Fiorina in 1999, found it particularly difficult to put their faith in the merger.

What Can Change Leaders Do?

The best way to build trust is by creating open channels of communication. People are more likely to doubt you if they believe that you are hiding something. Fairness is another prerequisite to making sure that people trust your intentions to make the decisions that are in their best interests. Giving people voice and hearing them further creates a culture of openness and fairness that allows you to build trust with a team.

Decide carefully who the face of the change will be, who will be communicating the message, who will people associate the change with. It is important that the change leader is a good communicator, trusted and liked by most

who are likely to be affected by the change being introduced.

Conclusion

Reaction to change is usually emotional and may stem from reasons that may not be as obvious to the change leader. Resistance to change may be reduced and the commitment towards change strengthened by firstly, focusing on creating clarity about the change so that team members can understand it. Understanding change is important before team members are willing to adopt it. Secondly, addressing all the emotional reactions to change instead of ignoring them will further open the teams to the new efforts.

Fear, sense of loss, and helplessness may be reduced by using open communication channels and participative decision making. Finally, ensuring that the change leader is trusted to make sound decisions as well as carry them out, further reduces any worries team members may have about the change effort. The message about the change is important, the person delivering the message is equally important for the message to be accepted.

Key Take-Aways

- Communicate clearly, openly and at the earliest with all those affected by change, establishing a clear need for change and answering questions.
- Invite participation from the team members who will be affected by change before making critical decisions. Give team members voice.
- Select change agents who have a good rapport with the team members and are trusted, to implement the change.
 - Provide support in the form of brown bag lunches and coffee talks to address smaller issues before they become big and threaten to derail the change effort.

<https://youtu.be/a0sdpX1JOrU>

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