

10 Things To Do About Resistance

Everybody is at least a little resistant to change. They wonder how it will affect them daily and in the long-term. There are ways to overcome resistance, though.

1. Acknowledge change as a process.

Change is not an event but an ongoing process. Remember that it may take years from goal-setting to stable results. Conflict and resistance are natural processes and not signs of failure.

2. Empower stakeholders.

To get the most cooperation, stakeholders must be included as decision makers. If meeting individual needs is part of the plan, resistance is less likely. Empowering people means creating mechanisms that provide them with genuine authority and responsibility. To minimize discord, the change process should be guided by negotiation, not by issuing demands.

3. Encourage all stakeholders.

Stakeholders must be active, invested participants throughout the change process. Setting up opportunities for individuals and groups to vent concerns can be effective. Being heard is fundamental in establishing understanding and consensus.

4. Set concrete goals.

Set goals by consensus, creating a broad sense of ownership. This step is critical because stakeholders will be able to return to a shared agenda when there are missteps. This makes it easier to refocus.

5. Be sensitive.

Everyone needs respect, sensitivity, and support as they work to redefine their roles and master new concepts. Managing conflict means being aware of differences among individuals. Each stakeholder must genuinely feel valued throughout the change process.

6. Model process skills.

Teach by demonstrating the appropriate skills and actions. Trainers may find that reflecting publicly and in a straightforward manner on their own doubts and resistance may help others.

7. Develop strategies for dealing with emotions.

Educators often focus on outcomes, neglecting the emotions that can go with change. Focus on such questions as: How will our lives be different? How do we feel about the changes? Is there anything that can or should be done to honor the past before we move on?

8. Manage conflict.

Ideally, change is a negotiated process. Stakeholders should be invited to negotiate issues that may cause resistance. For example, an assistant principal may need to negotiate the needs of the whole school with faculty members more concerned with departmental priorities.

9. Communicate.

Talk, write memos, e-mail. Open communication is a necessity. It can move concerns out of the shadows so they can be resolved. Try focusing on reflective questions such as: Where are we in the process? Where are we headed?

10. Monitor process dynamics.

The constant interplay between groups involved in the change must be monitored and the appropriate adjustments must be made. Begin evaluations when the change process is being developed and continue throughout. Ongoing evaluations of progress are essential.

Source: "Shhh, the Dragon Is Asleep and Its Name Is Resistance," by Monica Janas, *Journal of Staff Development*, Summer 1998 (Vol. 19, No. 3). Available online at www.nsdcc.org/library/jstd/janas193.html.

"The main

dangers in this

life are the

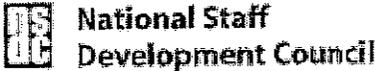
people who

want to change

everything ... or

nothing."

— Lady Nancy Astor



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Shhhhh, the dragon is asleep and its name is Resistance

By Monica Janas

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Can you recognize a common element in these three scenarios?

- Mary Jones, a principal, listened to her faculty when they requested release time for peer coaching. After lengthy collaborative planning with faculty and staff, she implemented a schedule that supported the peer coaching initiative. But after one semester, she noticed that many teachers never participated in peer coaching activities. In fact, some teachers who originally spoke up about the need to work with colleagues appeared to be socializing during release time instead.

- As director of staff development for a school system, Dave Thomas supervised an annual districtwide staff learning day. A veteran at structuring opportunities for professional development, Thomas conducted an interest survey before working with representatives from across the district to create an agenda that reflected the interests and needs of a wide range of school personnel. Thomas believed his committee had designed an outstanding plan. However, on the morning of the event, he overheard one teacher saying to another: "I wonder what the dog-and-pony show is this time? I don't know about you, but inservice days are a complete waste of my time and the school district's money. I came early to get a seat in the back so I can work on a unit I'm doing."

- Working closely with the staffs of local schools, Jane Smith, a faculty member at a local college, conducted a needs assessment survey of topics for professional education courses. After developing a number of courses in consultation with the school district administrators, Smith arranged to offer a slate of courses to meet the needs that had been identified. Unfortunately, registration was so poor that most courses had to be canceled.

What Went Wrong?

Can you recognize a common force that worked against change in each of these typical but fictitious scenarios?

If you responded "resistance," you successfully identified a major barrier to potential change. Resistance — the sleeping dragon of the change process — can be a challenge for every professional committed to reform and innovation. As these scenarios illustrate, resistance thwarts goals, disrupts action plans, and undermines progress.

In spite of the long history of educational reform efforts, resistance continues to play a

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noteworthy role in change (Friend & Cook, 1996; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995). In a review of the most significant advances in staff development, Guskey (1994, p. 6) concluded: "The gap in education between our knowledge base and general practice remains depressingly large." Even with ideal conditions, high expectations, and motivated educators, problems still arise when working toward innovations and reform (Winitzky, Stoddart, & O'Keefe, 1992). Resistance to change occupies a large part of the gap between knowledge and practice; between vision and reality.

However, resistance is not always a negative force. If identified and managed correctly, resistance can actually become a force for improving professional development, enhancing program innovation, and providing rich opportunities for reflection, growth, and renewal. This can be aided by a three-step process:

- Being aware of resistance.
- Identifying sources and types of resistance.
- Developing and applying proactive strategies for managing resistance.

Being aware of resistance

Broadly defined, resistance is a fearful response to change (Marshak, 1996; Valencia & Killion, 1988). A natural part of any change process (Theron & van der Westhuizen, 1996), resistance frequently occurs as a response to an interpersonal or organizational change that has the potential of personal impact (Friend & Cook, 1996).

Resistance to change is not all bad, or always an obstruction to reform. Resistance often serves a constructive purpose (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995) and is frequently an appropriate response to a situation, especially when it is a symptom of deeper problems. For instance, people may legitimately resist change required by a program that's poorly designed, underfunded, or focused on unnecessary activities. A teacher who has seen numerous ill-conceived, irrelevant staff development initiatives come and go will understandably view new programs with suspicion.

Sources and types of resistance

Sources of resistance are not always clear, in part because on some level, resistance to change is a normal, valued function of existence. An individual naturally resists threats to the stability of their personality, for example (Watson, 1969). The same tendency also can be seen on a system or group level: Homeostasis, the tendency to prefer the known to the potential of the unknown as a result of change, is well documented (Friend & Cook, 1996).

Staff developers need to assess stakeholder beliefs and actions to determine the presence of resistance. This needs to be an ongoing part of talking with stakeholders and working with them on staff development activities. However, developers need to keep in mind how difficult this assessment process can be. Regardless of whether resistance is an individual or group reaction, it is difficult to recognize because it can take several forms (Karp, 1984).

Developing strategies

Overcoming resistance is important, complex work (Clift, Holland, & Veal, 1990). Staff developers need to play pivotal roles in recognizing, understanding, and minimizing resistance before it evolves into a barrier to progress. This means being proactive: helping stakeholders identify key issues and potential roadblocks so the change process remains on track. (See "10 things to do" above for examples of ideas and actions that can help staff developers craft successful proactive strategies.)

The "sleeping dragon" metaphor illustrates the duality and complexity of managing resistance.

Change agents often tiptoe around this dragon, hoping it will not awaken. If awakened, they fear, resistance will wreak havoc. A proactive approach to managing resistance, however, can help staff developers tame the dragon and, thus, turn resistance into a positive force that influences staff development efforts and helps narrow the gap between reform initiatives and educational practices.

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