



4 Tips for Handling Resistance to Culture Change

By Jamie Notter

Once we finish our Culture Design project with clients, their next step is to begin intentionally changing their culture. One of their biggest fears, at that point, is that their employees will resist the change. In general, the fear tends to be greater than the reality, but if they do encounter resistance, we give them this advice:

1. Over-communicate.

The classic phrase “Tell them what you’re going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you told them” is applicable here. Culture change requires people to get out of the rut they have been in, but remember, it’s natural for the wheel to slip back into that rut, so the constant reminders of what you’re changing about the culture (and why) can easily get them back out of the rut. You should be constantly reminding people of the new culture priorities you established, and show them the long list of “culture plays” in your playbook that represent the breadth and depth of the culture change efforts.

2. Keep focused on the “why.”

If you have people who are refusing to engage in the new behaviors you’ve identified as part of your culture change, make sure you reinforce with them WHY you need these new behaviors—that is, how it makes them and the whole organization more successful. That’s where good culture priorities come in. Don’t just point to the core values, make the case that the specific shifts you are making in your culture are designed to drive everyone’s success.

3. Learn from the resistance.

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Remember, your culture change plan may not be perfect. When people are resisting, take time to talk to them about why. Are the new culture behaviors getting in the way of success in ways you didn't foresee? Are there new areas of friction being generated? You should have a long list of culture plays to run as you are changing your culture, and sometimes the resistance is simply telling you that particular play is either off target, or maybe just mis-timed. You can always pull that play out and swap a new one in.

4. Be ready to transition people out.

This is not always required, but if the resistance to the culture change is something at the core of the culture that has a big impact on your success, and you've tried (unsuccessfully) to coach the individual to adopt the changes, then you both may be better off with that person working at a different organization. Your people need to want to be a part of your culture to work there, and it's okay if they choose not to. But don't keep them on when they don't want to be a part of the culture. This is one reason why you should integrate your culture priorities with your performance management system.

And if you don't have culture priorities or a culture playbook driving your culture change, then consider doing some deep culture design work with us!

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