

How to Counter Resistance to Change

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Across the table from my most important and challenging client, I faced a conflict that required a delicate and sophisticated approach if I was to achieve the outcome I wanted. This client is by far the savviest negotiator I've ever faced and she's driven to win. The conversation went something like this:

"Daddy, what's for dessert?" Isabelle was six at the time. Willpower was not one of her "areas needing development."

"Well let's see, you can have an apple or some grapes."

"I want ice cream."

"That's not one of the choices, Sweetie. Do you want an apple or grapes?"

"Ice cream."

We went on like that for a few minutes and then she said, "If I can't have ice cream then I want a banana."

"Hmm," I responded, "that's not one of the choices but that's OK too. I'll get you one."

"Thanks Daddy," she said, clearly happy. Was she happy to have a banana or happy to have gotten something that was not one of the choices I offered?

It doesn't matter. Because my goal wasn't to break her will or show her who's boss. I was going for a very specific and clear outcome: nothing less than to build in her a lifelong habit of healthy eating. I wanted her to eat fruit for dessert and (this is the challenging part) be happy about it.

Having others work hard to achieve a goal you've set — not because you're forcing them to but because they choose to — is exactly the challenge leaders face in organizations every day.

And succeeding in it makes all the difference. For the employee it's the difference between being micromanaged and being self-motivated. For the organization it's the difference between passive resistance and energized alignment. And for you, the leader, it's the difference between frustrating exhaustion and inspired collaboration.

The job of a leader or manager (and these days who isn't a leader or a manager in one form or another?) is simple: to influence people. And there's one defining idea we have in our heads that makes that job harder.

We believe that people resist change.

So we do all sorts of things to counter that resistance. We try to motivate or coerce people to change.

But instead of breaking through resistance, we *create* it. People resist being controlled. And so 70% of all corporate change efforts fail.

Here's what's interesting: people freely choose to make major life changes every day. We move, get married, start families, face challenges, learn new technologies, change jobs, and develop new skills. Not all of these changes are smooth. But most of the time we seek those changes ourselves and make them successfully.

So why are people willing to change in one situation and resistant to it in another?

Because people don't resist change, they resist *being* changed.

In their personal lives people usually make their own choices. But in organizations they feel coerced. And so they use the only power they have to regain control: resistance.

To avoid the resistance? Give them control. Let them make decisions. If you offer them two choices (apple or grapes) and they pick a third (banana) you have the opportunity to cede control to them as long as their choice achieves the outcome acceptable to you (fruit). Then they *own* their decision and are happy with it because they made it themselves.

The key is to make it real. If you try to trick people into thinking they have control when they don't, you'll lose credibility. You have to actually give them some control, while keeping some for yourself, because as a manager, you're always accountable for the outcome.

So here are the three steps:

1. Define the outcome you want.
2. Suggest a path to achieve it.
3. Allow people to reject your path as long as they choose an alternate route to the same destination.

For example, if you want managers to have career development conversations with employees, propose a method of having those conversations. If managers disagree, ask them what they'd prefer to do and when they offer an alternative, as long as it gets employees and managers talking, accept it.

Same idea if you're rolling out a new technology, sales process, HR practice, or (fill in the blank). Don't sell it or try to get "buy-in." Instead of seeking agreement, try to surface *disagreement*. That gives you the opportunity to allow people to make changes, there on the spot. And then they become accountable.

Or let's say you need an aligned, focused, collaborative senior team but two of the top team members can't seem to work together. Put them in a room and explain to them the negative impact they're having on the business. Then ask what they want to do about it.

Yesterday Isabelle (now seven) was upset about something her friend did in school. She asked me to speak with her friend's mother. I didn't immediately say I wouldn't, though I clearly knew I wouldn't.

The outcome I want is for her to develop confidence in her ability to solve her own problems and also feel supported by me. So I asked her what she wanted me to say to her friend's mother. She told me and then I offered her two choices: she could say that to her friend or she could say it to her friend's mother. She didn't like either choice so she opted for the banana: she would say it to her friend and her friend's mother at the same time, while holding my hand.

Often a banana is the sweetest dessert there is.

Works Cited

Bregman, Peter. "How to Counter Resistance to Change." *HBR Blog Network*. Harvard Business Review, 28 Apr. 2009. Web. 12 July 2013.