

Challenging “Resistance to Change”

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This article examines the origins of one of the most widely accepted mental models that drives organizational behavior: the idea that there is resistance to change and that managers must overcome it. This mental model, held by employees at all levels, interferes with successful change implementation. The authors trace the emergence of the term *resistance to change* and show how it became received truth. Kurt Lewin introduced the term as a systems concept, as a force affecting managers and employees equally. Because the terminology, but not the context, was carried forward, later uses increasingly cast the problem as a psychological concept, personalizing the issue as employees versus managers. Acceptance of this model confuses an understanding of change dynamics. Letting go of the term—and the model it has come to embody—will make way for more useful models of change dynamics. The authors conclude with a discussion of alternatives to resistance to change.

We have taught hundreds of graduate students who are working as middle managers in organizations. We have consulted in organizations of all sizes in a number of industries. We have found an amazing diversity of opinions on a number of topics. Surprisingly (to us), we continue to encounter a mental model that, in our experience, is almost universally accepted in organizational life—people resist change. Moreover, this statement is found in nearly every textbook about management or organizational

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behavior. It is taken as a fact of life by those people who have not had the opportunity to specifically study, in depth, the question of how people change. Those of us in academia have to realize that, in spite of our best intentions and efforts, the conventional wisdom concerning *resistance to change* has not been significantly altered by academic work in the past 30 years.

We assert, however, that the best way to challenge the conventional wisdom is to suggest that people do *not* resist change, per se. People may resist loss of status, loss of pay, or loss of comfort, but these are not the same as resisting change. The belief that people do resist change causes all kinds of unproductive actions within organizations. It is time that we dispense with the phrase *resistance to change* and find more useful and appropriate models for describing what the phrase has come to mean—employees are not wholeheartedly embracing a change that management wants to implement. Employees may resist the unknown, being dictated to, or management ideas that do not seem feasible from the employees' standpoint. However, in our research, we have found few or no instances of employees resisting change. Kotter (1995) observed more than 100 companies in a decade and reported that when organizations attempt a major change, the employees often understand the new vision and want to make it happen, but there are obstacles that prevent execution. Certainly, those obstacles may be in the individual (his or her resistance), but Kotter states that such individual resistance is rare. More often, the obstacle is in the organization's structure or in a "performance-appraisal system [that] makes people choose between the new vision and their own self-interest" (p. 64). In a study of 3,000 Ford managers, Spreitzer and Quinn (1996) discovered that middle managers blamed executives above them for resisting change efforts. This finding is consistent with Smith's (1982) report that the people in power will work toward maintaining the status quo, not dramatically changing it.

Is our argument merely one of semantics? We do not think so. The mental construct represented by resistance to change molds the behavior of people in organizations. Most mental models are so deeply embedded that people do not even realize they are simply models; people believe they are reality (Senge, 1990). Mental models are critically important. Boulding (1988) has suggested that inappropriate mental models are one of the primary factors causing organizational dysfunction today, even threatening the survival of some organizations (p. 101). As will be discussed below, change efforts that automatically expect resistance to change will likely be planned and implemented less than effectively. Porras and Robertson (1983) performed a meta-analysis of large numbers of change studies and discovered that fewer than 40% of the change efforts produced positive change in the dependent variable of interest. Beer, Eisenstat, and Spector (1990) found that in one third of the major resource-intensive change initiatives they studied in depth (following the textbook examples described below), the efforts actually made the situations worse. They argue that "most change programs do not work because they are guided by a theory of change that is fundamentally flawed" (p. 159). They identify the fundamental flaw as "the fallacy of programmatic change"—that the place to begin an organizational change is with the knowledge and attitudes of individuals. We share this perspective and offer a more simple explanation.

The belief in inherent resistance to change is the fundamental flaw of these change efforts.

If belief in resistance to change is so popular, and so widely accepted, how can we assert that it is a bankrupt mental model? The purpose of this article is to trace the ascendance of this mental model. We will show how this phrase became so popular. At the same time, we conclude that many unusual things happened along the way to make this phrase much more accepted than it should have been. Everything from Kurt Lewin's mindset to the arrogance of management has played a role in the popularization of *resistance to change*. We invite the reader to hear the story of the popularization of this phrase and then to decide for himself or herself whether the mental model has usefulness in organizations. We begin with a discussion of what typical modern textbooks say about resistance to change in order to lay the groundwork for examining how the concept arose.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE IN MANAGEMENT TEXTBOOKS

How has resistance to change become an established concept when looking at management and organizations? Kuhn (1970) says that the paradigm for a field gets handed down in a few ways, two of which are "shared commitment to beliefs" and "exemplars"—basic material all students would be taught about a subject. To see how the model of resistance to change is handed down from teacher to student, we examined the introductory management textbooks that publishers had sent to us for preview. A sampling of five current management textbooks (Aldag & Stearns, 1991; Dubrin & Ireland, 1993; Griffin, 1993; Kreitner, 1992; Schermerhorn, 1989) provides both a demonstration that the concept of resistance to change and its connotations have become a standard part of management vocabulary and a reminder of the way in which the idea becomes inculcated in the assumptions of new generations of managers. The phrase has become a standard topic heading in almost all management textbooks.

Most of these authors view resistance to change as a given and do not define it. As detailed in Table 1 and in the discussion that follows, there is great similarity from text to text in the description of causes of resistance to change and in strategies for overcoming it.

Kreitner

Kreitner (1992) compares change to a stone tossed into a still pond, which causes ripples to radiate in all directions with unpredictable consequences. Resistance arises from those whose jobs are directly affected. Both rational and irrational resistance can halt the change process. For change to be successful, management must foresee and neutralize any resistance that may occur. In a format common among all of these texts, the author then covers strategies for overcoming resistance to change. The key to success is adapting their use in a way that is situationally appropriate.

TABLE 1
Resistance to Change: Causes and Strategies

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Kreitner (1992)</i>	<i>Griffin (1993)</i>	<i>Aldag & Stearns (1991)</i>	<i>Schermerhorn (1989)</i>	<i>Dubrin & Ireland (1993)</i>
Causes of resistance					
Surprise	X				
Inertia	X				
Misunderstanding	X	X	X	X	
Emotional side effects	X	X	X	X	
Lack of trust	X	X	X	X	
Fear of failure	X				X
Personality conflicts	X	X	X	X	
Poor training	X				
Threat to job status/security	X	X	X	X	X
Work group breakup	X	X	X	X	
Fear of poor outcome					X
Faults of change					X
Uncertainty		X	X	X	
Strategies for overcoming					
Education	X	X	X	X	
Participation	X	X	X	X	X
Facilitation	X	X	X	X	
Negotiation	X	X	X	X	X
Manipulation	X	X	X	X	X
Coercion	X	X	X	X	
Discussion					X
Financial benefits					X
Political support					X

Griffin, Aldag & Stearns, and Schermerhorn

The next three textbooks—Griffin (1993), Aldag and Stearns (1991), and Schermerhorn (1989)—are almost identical to one another and very similar to Kreitner's (1992) in their coverage of resistance to change, as Table 1 shows. First, they deal with causes of resistance to change. Some of these include uncertainty, threatened self-interests, perceptions different from employers' about necessity for and consequences of change, feelings of loss, and lack of tolerance. These authors also recommend overcoming this resistance with participation, education, facilitation, negotiation, manipulation, and implicit or explicit coercion. Like Kreitner, the authors of these texts believe that employees can be manipulated, both by withholding information so they will not worry prematurely and by implying future benefits such as promotions or raises if they go along with the change.

Dubrin & Ireland

In *Management and Organization*, Dubrin and Ireland (1993) treat resistance to change somewhat differently. They first deal with managing change and models of the change process. They attribute resistance to change to three main factors: people's fear of poor outcomes (e.g., that they might earn less money, be personally inconvenienced, or be required to perform more work), people's fear of the unknown, and workers' realization of faults with change overlooked by management and their fear of resulting problems.

Areas of Change

After the segments on resistance to change, our five sample texts turn to a discussion of administrative change, technological change, and structural change. All of these will produce resistance, the authors believe, and therefore it is necessary to use strategies to overcome this resistance. Change can be planned as part of organization development (OD). The various authors consider OD to be an effort that helps people work together more effectively by utilizing theories, principles, and methods from a variety of disciplines.

The authors of these texts accept resistance to change as a given. Most have similar views of causes of resistance to change and similar prescriptions to overcome it. Dubrin and Ireland (1993) add the idea of fear as the common denominator of resistance to change. Interestingly, the authors all write about resistance to change from the perspective that the reader is trying to do the right thing, and everyone else, more or less, is "screwing up."¹ Moreover, they all treat resistance to change as a psychological concept—resistance or support of change is seen as within the individual.

LEWIN'S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CHANGE—A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

The notion of *resistance to change* is credited to Kurt Lewin. His conceptualization of the phrase, however, is very different from today's usage. Lewin evolved his concept "based on the 'person' as a complex energy field in which all behavior could be conceived of as a change in some state of a field" (Marrow, 1969, p. 30). For Lewin, resistance to change could occur, but that resistance could be anywhere in the system. As Kotter (1995) found, it is possible for the resistance to be sited within the individual, but it is much more likely to be found elsewhere in the system. A brief review of Lewin's work and affiliations is instructive in revealing his perspective.

Organizational behavior pioneers David Bowers and Stanley Seashore describe Lewin's view of organizational and social change this way:

Systems of social roles, with their associated patterns of attitudes, expectations, and behavior norms, share with biological systems the characteristic of homeostasis—i.e., tendencies to resist change, to

restore the previous state after a disturbance. In observing instances of successful change, Lewin noted that they had three phases: first, an “unfreezing,” or disruption of the initial steady state, then a period of disturbance with trial of various adaptive possibilities, and finally a period of consolidation of change with a “refreezing” in a new steady state. (Marrow, 1972, pp. 231-232)

Lewin had been working on this idea, that the status quo represented an equilibrium between the barriers to change and the forces favoring change, since 1928 as part of his field theory (Weisbord, 1987, p. 80). He believed that some difference in these forces—a weakening of the barriers or a strengthening of the driving forces—was required to produce the unfreezing that began a change. For the resulting change to become permanent after moving to a new level, refreezing is required to freeze at the higher level. He held that it was more effective to weaken the barriers than to strengthen the drivers.

Lewin said that production levels could be viewed as a balance between forces pushing production up and those pushing it down. The difference in the strength of those forces describes the difference between the participating and nonparticipating groups. This idea of Lewin’s about how change works is part of his pioneering studies of group dynamics, a term that he first used in a 1939 article (Weisbord, 1987, p. 83). The use of the word *dynamics* was carefully chosen. Marrow (1957), in his book *Making Management Human*, quotes Dorwin Cartwright, then director of the Research Center for Group Dynamics, as saying, *dynamics*

comes from a Greek word meaning force. In careful usage of the phrase, “group dynamics” refers to the forces operating in groups. The investigation of group dynamics then consists of a study of these forces: what gives rise to them, what conditions modify them, what consequences they have. (p. 50)

Marrow (1957) noted that there are both formal and informal groups in an organization. “Why these groups, both formal and informal, act the way they do, why they accept change or resist it, and how they influence the conduct of their members are some of the themes of group dynamics” (p. 50). Lewin wrote in 1945 that “the conditions of group life and the forces which bring about change or which resist change should be investigated. The term ‘dynamics’ refers to these forces” (p. 130). It was his idea that change experiments should be a primary methodology for developing information about group dynamics.

In a 1947 paper, Lewin wrote, “Change and constancy are relative concepts; group life is never without change, merely differences in the amount and type of change exist” (p. 13). In a section of the paper titled “Constancy and Resistance to Change,” he said, “Only by relating the actual degree of constancy to the strength of forces toward or away from the present state of affairs can one speak of degrees of resistance or ‘stability’ of group life in a given respect.” In the same paper, Lewin says that “the practical task of social management, as well as the scientific task of understanding the dynamics of group life, requires insight into the desire for and resistance to, specific change” (p. 14).

In a presentation to the Industrial Relations Research Association at the 1949 meetings in Denver, John R. P. French Jr. and Alvin Zander (1949) discussed the resistance to change experiment at the Harwood Manufacturing Corporation:

But why did participation yield these results? From interviews, observation of workers, and other data it was clear that the best way to understand these data was by postulating the presence of certain forces on the worker pushing him to conform to a certain standard of behavior and attitude. By a force we mean a tendency to locomotion in a given direction. In this situation there were a number of forces at work. There were forces put upon them by management to raise their level of production for obvious reasons. There were also forces acting against those already mentioned, which were created by the worker's lack of skill and his desire to avoid strain on the job by taking it easy. (p. 72)

Cartwright suggested accordingly that the best way for an executive to achieve "dynamic change" might be for him or her to become part of the group, with the result, as Marrow (1957) tells it, that "the changes required by the welfare of the business become everybody's business and get made" (p. 66).

Lewin, then, had a very different conceptualization of resistance to change than is commonly held today. Lewin saw work taking place within a system of roles, attitudes, behaviors, norms, and other factors, any and all of which could cause the system to be in disequilibrium. Lewin's notion of force-field analysis nicely encapsulates his perspective. For Lewin, resistance to change was a systems phenomenon, not a psychological one (although the psychology of the humans in the system certainly is an element of the total system).

We turn now to examine the first publication using the term *resistance to change* and the path it has followed to wide acceptance in today's organizations.

THE ADVENT OF THE TERM *RESISTANCE TO CHANGE*

The first known published reference to research on resistance to change in organizations was "Overcoming Resistance to Change" by Coch and French (1948). Coch and French conducted research at the Harwood Manufacturing Company, a pajama factory in Virginia. Their research questions were "(1) Why do people resist change so strongly? and (2) What can be done to overcome this resistance?" (p. 512). They claim that their "preliminary theory [was] that resistance to change is a combination of an individual reaction to frustration with strong group-induced forces" (p. 521).

Through a variety of experiments, Coch and French (1948) basically conclude that groups that were allowed to participate in the design and development of the changes have much lower resistance than those that do not. Moreover, they conclude that "participation through representation results in slower recovery than does total participation" (p. 524). Coch and French advise managers to hold group meetings to communicate the need for change and to solicit employee involvement in the planning of the change.

The word *resistance* appears in the article only at the beginning and once in the conclusion. The article reports on experimental tests with supporting graphs and tables. However, Coch and French's (1948) research really is about the importance of employee participation. The choice of the article's title is surprising. Equally surprising is the persistence of this phrase in virtually all later descriptions of the problems of change efforts.

The Origins of the Concept of Overcoming Resistance to Change

What made the Coch and French (1948) article so influential? What made their title so compelling? One way to approach these questions is to attempt to make explicit considerations that were implicit at the time the article was published and thereby became invisible to succeeding generations. In the examination of frames of reference that affect the receipt of original work, we can learn much about why the truth derived from it is passed on in the way it has been. Frames of reference are inescapable—researchers inevitably carry with them the biases created by their own past experiences and theories. The best they can do is be as explicit as possible about what these are. We examine four factors of the original experiment on resistance to change with a view to making its invisible framework more explicit.

- The site
- The sponsors of the study
- The researchers and publishers
- The dissemination of the findings

The Site

The Harwood Manufacturing Corporation was a relatively small company: The Marion plant had fewer than 1,000 employees at the time the resistance to change experiments were conducted (Marrow, 1972, p. 83). Nonetheless, Harwood was the site of many experiments in the behavioral sciences and workplace innovation, beginning in the late 1930s and extending over the next four decades.

The Sponsors of the Study

The owners of Harwood by 1940 were unusually receptive to research. The plant had been in the family since 1899, and in the late 1930s it was turned over to Alfred J. Marrow, a psychologist, and his brother Seymour, an engineer (Marrow, Bowers, & Seashore, 1967, p. 24). As a doctoral student, Alfred Marrow had arranged to meet Lewin and had begun collaborating with him. After his doctoral dissertation, which was a field test of Lewin's work (Weisbord, 1987, p. 78), Marrow returned to the company only because Lewin persuaded him of the value of conducting action research in an ongoing workplace (Marrow, 1972, p. 84). Marrow was active as an officer of the company for many years, but he also earned distinction in the field of organizational behavior and development, for example, winning social psychology's highest honor,

the Kurt Lewin Award, in 1964 (Marrow, 1964, p. 11). He wrote a number of books, including a biography of Lewin, and was a founding member of the National Training Laboratories at Bethel, Maine. His unusual willingness to have the company support studies on-site exposed many other researchers to the ideas there propounded, including resistance to change.

The Researchers and Publishers

At the time of the experiment, the writers in this case were both Harwood employees: Coch was the personnel manager (Marrow, 1969, p. 150), and French, who had been personnel director earlier (Marrow et al., 1967, p. 24), was director of research (Marrow, 1957, p. 92). Each probably had responsibility for both research and workplace outcomes. Such dual considerations may have made them comfortable with the phrase *resistance to change* as the descriptor for what they were facing. Coch's duties at least probably would have involved participation in the selection and training of the workers in question. He probably was the one facing the grievances from the union. These responsibilities may well have affected their framing of the question of aggression against management and led to their use of the word *overcoming* in this context.

In a book he published in 1957, Marrow writes about the resistance to change experiment. His description of the control group, the one that was treated like all the previous groups that had been having trouble learning the new machines and that had been quitting, follows:

Production by the first group dropped 35 per cent per day after the change-over; nor did it improve for a month thereafter. With the falling-off came deteriorated morale and marked gestures of hostility toward the company: restriction of output, subtle noncooperation. It turned out later that an agreement to "get even" with management had been explicitly made. Within two weeks after the change, 9 per cent of the operators had quit. Others quickly filed grievances about the pay rate, although it was, in fact, a little too high. Morale was bad, of course. (p. 118)

Given these reactions from employees, it is also easier to understand why the phrase *resistance to change* might have seemed appropriate to the manager-researchers.

The Dissemination of the Findings

As we shall see, most of the later references to producing change continue to refer to the phrase *overcoming resistance to change*. Coch, French, and Marrow were all themselves active in the developing organizational behavior network, especially at the Research Center for Group Dynamics, which Lewin had founded, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at the University of Michigan, where the center moved after Lewin's death in 1947. Accordingly, they and the research were well connected and well regarded, important in this growing field. Because one of the topics that those in the field came to discuss more than anything was dealing with change, the persistence of the concept of resistance to change and of the idea that it has to be overcome is perhaps not so surprising. It is possible, as we shall discuss, that the meaning

changed over time because of its separation from the context of Lewin's original framework.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE IN THE 1950s AND 1960s

This section of the article discusses the earliest sources found containing the phrase *resistance to change*.

- "Overcoming Resistance to Change" by Lester Coch and John R. P. French Jr. (1948)
- "Resistance to Change—Its Analysis and Prevention" by Alvin F. Zander (1950)
- "How to Deal With Resistance to Change" by Paul R. Lawrence (1954)
- "Overcoming Resistance to Change" by Mitchell Dreese (1955 speech)²
- *Overcoming Resistance to Change* by Oliver D. Flower (1962 film)

We were immediately struck that three of the five titles above are "Overcoming Resistance to Change," and the other two are close cousins. A phrase must strike a responsive chord for it to be seen as such an attractive title to so many people. As we will see from these five sources, by 1962, *resistance to change* had taken on the meaning that is widely understood by our students and organizational clients today and continues to be promulgated in textbooks. That meaning is a psychological concept in which resistance is sited within the individual, and the manager's task is to overcome that resistance.

Zander—"Resistance to Change—Its Analysis and Prevention"

Alvin Zander was a close colleague of Kurt Lewin's and the two individuals had many conversations about their work. Consequently, much of Zander's article is similar to the perspectives offered by Lewin above. Still, Zander introduces a different slant on resistance to change. Moreover, the examples he provides (all of which are a subordinate resisting a manager's change efforts) focus attention in a certain direction. Zander (1950) defines resistance to change as "behavior which is intended to protect an individual from the effects of real or imagined change" (p. 9). Rather than providing a systems model, Zander equates resistance in organizations to that of a psychotherapist and a patient. Zander's article does make a distinction often found in systems models. He separates the cause and the symptom of resistance. His primary advice for practicing managers is to know what the resistance (hostility, sloppy effort, fawning submissiveness, etc.) means so that they may reduce it by working on the causes rather than the symptoms.

Zander offers six primary reasons for resistance to surface:

- if the nature of the change is not made clear to the people who are going to be influenced by the change,

- if the change is open to a wide variety of interpretations,
- if those influenced feel strong forces deterring them from changing,
- if the people influenced by the change have pressure put on them to make it instead of having a say in the nature or the direction of the change,
- if the change is made on personal grounds, and
- if the change ignores the already established institutions in the group.

Lawrence—"How to Deal With Resistance to Change"

Lawrence argues that Coch and French misinterpreted their findings. Coch and French argued that participation was the primary method to overcome resistance to change. Lawrence points out that the group that had the poorest results (the no-participation group) was the usual one in the factory for introducing changes in a progressive way. Suddenly this group is dealt with more formally, and they are not consulted. Lawrence suggests that what is really happening at Harwood for this special group is the loss of status and the absence of the former acknowledgment of their skills. Lawrence contends that the operators did not resist the technical aspect of the change but, rather, the social aspect of the change.

According to Lawrence (1954), "One of the most baffling and recalcitrant of the problems which business executives face is employee resistance to change" (p. 4). Possibly the most important point Lawrence makes is that change has both a technical and social dimension. Although that point seems commonplace today, it seems not to have been widely accepted in 1954.

Lawrence identifies the typical work change as occurring because a staff specialist (e.g., an engineer) takes a modification in a manufacturing procedure to a foreman or an assembly worker. Lawrence believes that resistance to change occurs primarily for two reasons:

- The staff specialist is so preoccupied with the technology of the change that he or she is oblivious to the social aspects.
- The staff specialist does not recognize production employees as being specialists in their own right.

Lawrence offers five prescriptions for what management can do about resistance to change:

- *Broaden staff interests.* Staff specialists become so identified with their "baby" that they are not open to ideas.
- *Use understandable terms.* Staff specialists should work with production employees until changes make sense to the latter group.
- *Take a new look at resistance.* "Another attitude that gets staff men into trouble is the *expectation* that all the people involved will resist the change."
- *Develop new job definitions.* The new job definition should be broadened from "the generation of ideas" to "the generation and implementation of ideas."
- *Revise the role of the administrator.* The manager should see himself or herself as primarily a facilitator of communication and understanding between people with different points

of view rather than as someone who checks up, delegates and follows through, and applies pressure to performance gaps.

Flower—*Overcoming Resistance to Change*

This film is quick to point out that without change, there is no progress. However, people at work do not welcome change, and key people may resist it the most. The solution for those managing change is finding out what the change means from the employee's perspective. For managers, the change is often very straightforward—"the situation was A, it is changing to B." For employees, the following different situations often occur:

- The employees may not be clear about what B is. Until everyone understands the who, what, why, when, and where of the change, there will likely be resistance.
- If the boss insists on the change happening a certain way, this insistence will trigger resistance, and viewers are further admonished that such bosses will lose the good ideas of the employees.
- The change could threaten someone's status.
- The change could isolate someone.
- An employee who is already "fully burdened" will likely resist a change as adding work.

Moreover, additional resistance is often triggered by the way the manager reacts to the initial resistance.

Flower asks, what should managers do with such a recalcitrant group? Most important, they must understand the change from the employees' perspective. Managers must admit their own shortcomings in implementing the change. The greatest need for change in order to overcome resistance is in the manager. The film shows employees resisting in each of the forms above and then shows how to "overcome" that resistance. The basic prescriptions are as follows:

- "Give a man an opportunity to shape a change so that he feels it is his own." Providing opportunities for participation is the most important step.
- Pick the right time to engage "overcoming" strategies, and deal with each person individually, not as a group.
- Do not expect people to change until you have established two-way communication.
- Do not simply impose change.
- Make the changes nonthreatening and consistent with the employees' self-images.

Analysis

It is striking that although these works all have essentially the same title, the first four, at least, approach the concept of resistance to change differently and provide different prescriptions for what to do about it. The 1962 film, in some ways, encompasses aspects of each of the first four articles.

Each work has made an important contribution to the area of change management. Coch and French (1948) confirmed Lewin's work on the importance of participation by all people in proposed changes that will affect them. Zander (1950) suggested that managers use signs of resistance as an indicator of a cause that needs to be addressed.

Lawrence (1954) proposed that the existence of both technical and social dimensions of change and that problems most often occur when the social aspects are not addressed. Dreese (1955) turned the focus to the individual and offered suggestions for what an individual could do to avoid becoming resistant. Flower (1962) presented a very comprehensive set of resistance causes and cures. These cover both technical and social dimensions as well as causes such as an employee's being overburdened and cures such as the manager's choosing the proper time. Each of these researchers should be commended for the valuable contributions he has made to how we today understand change.

Each researcher, however, has also confounded the problem of effectively implementing change strategies in organizations. We think the following are setbacks to current understanding of change to which each of these researchers has inadvertently contributed.

Each author who identifies resistance lists a symptom of the supervisor or the way the change was implemented but blames subordinates for the problems. The phrase *overcoming resistance to change* implicitly suggests that the source of the problem is solely within the subordinates and that the supervisor or more senior executive must overcome this unnatural reaction. This idea does not do justice to Lewin's understanding of the forces that drive or restrain change. In these formulations of Lewin's successors, the emphasis is being shifted from the idea of resistance as a natural force that is a factor in any individual's attempt to change himself or herself and thus is a factor in any group change. This shift led to supervisors appropriating the pejorative term *resistance* and tagging subordinates with it. The implicit assumption is that subordinate resistance is always inappropriate.

Likewise, the prescriptions offered by these authors (except Dreese) are for the supervisor to implement, not for the supposed resisters of change. Each author assumes that supervisors foster and implement change and that subordinates (at any level) resist change. In each example of resistance to change that the authors offer, the real issue, as stated by these authors, is a failing by the changer, not the change. Note that this assumption differs from the findings of Spreitzer and Quinn (1996) and others who have found that employees in the lower levels often are eager to make changes but encounter resistance from senior executives.

Each author offers prescriptions for preventing resistance in the first place, not for overcoming it once it surfaces; nonetheless, each uses "overcome resistance." All five works contain prescriptions for overcoming resistance to change. Note that the prescriptions are all preventative in nature. In other words, they all are strategies for preventing resistance in the first place, not for overcoming resistance once it has occurred. This difference would be like having a paper on measles vaccinations titled, "Overcoming an Outbreak of Measles."

Each author assumes that resistance to change is natural and should be expected by those affected by the change. If the situation is framed so that resistance is natural and

then must be overcome once it is on the scene, a self-fulfilling prophecy may emerge. Supervisors create the self-fulfilling prophecy because

someone holding the hypothesis of, or actually believing in, resistance to change, will plan on resistance, will plot ways to minimize it, will be tempted to disguise or hide the change, will keep it a secret, in short take any and all actions to overcome this assumed resistance, which then, surprise, surprise, leads to the appearance of the very phenomenon that was hoped to be avoided. (Winslow, 1992, p. 9)

Assuming resistance to change, and the textbook strategies for overcoming it, does not form a useful framework for resolving change implementation issues. All of the above problems culminate in the conclusion that overcoming resistance to change is not a useful framework for dealing with issues or effectively resolving problems pertaining to change management. In addition to our evidence about the mental model, the practical experience of change suggests that this approach is not as successful as it should be. As mentioned earlier, Kotter (1995), Beer et al. (1990), and Porras and Robertson (1983) all testify to the relative ineffectiveness of this approach. Why is the title of these works “Overcoming Resistance to Change”? Based on the content, the title should be “Overcoming Perfectly Natural Reactions to Poor Management,” or “How To (and Not To) Implement Change,” or “Common Management Mistakes in Implementing Change.” Some authors caution the reader not to assume that resistance will occur, but while the idea is still framed as overcoming resistance, the self-fulfilling prophesy is almost impossible to avoid.

Primarily because of the incorrect framing of the problem, each work contains internal inconsistencies. At some level, we believe each author “felt” some or all of the problems we are describing. Within each article, the author or authors vacillate about their beliefs concerning resistance to change. Lawrence (1954), for example, after recognizing that it is defeatist to assume that resistance to change will occur, notes in his postscript 15 years later that “we are all, at times, resisters as well as instigators of change.” Early in the article, he tells the reader not to assume that people resist change, but then he ends by saying, do assume that people resist change.

SUMMARY OF THE RISE OF RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Resistance to change would not be received truth today had it not been for the life and work of Kurt Lewin. His conceptualization of group dynamics, force-field analysis, and other contributions to organizational theory created a framework in which the word *resistance* would naturally fit. Coch and French (1948) were familiar with that framework and overlaid it in their work at the Harwood Manufacturing Corporation. Some researchers, including Lawrence and ourselves, who do not have the orientation of Coch and French, see issues other than resistance to change as prominent at Harwood.

Researchers and managers in the 1950s quickly adopted the phrase, although, as we have seen, with different meaning. The 1950s was also a time when the percentage of union membership in the United States reached its zenith, and it was common for managers to think dichotomously of labor versus management. We suggest that by the end of that decade, the idea of resistance to change had become crystallized into what can be called received truth. By definition, received truth is accepted without question. Textbooks assume it without defining it or examining its credibility. The received truth of the mental model of resistance to change owes little to Lewin's original formulation of the concept except the phrase itself.

Received truth that no longer usefully represents situations, however, causes managers to be frustrated by the failure of their change efforts to be implemented as successfully as they would like. Supervisors, for example, look to make changes in subordinates when the real need may be for a change within the system. Or, the real need is for a modification in the way the change effort is being implemented.

ALTERNATIVES TO THE MENTAL MODEL OF RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

We have argued that the term *resistance to change* has gone through a transformation in meaning from a systems concept to a psychological one. Recent work in this area seems to be restoring the concept to its roots as a systems understanding. Kotter (1995) writes of removing obstacles in the total system. Beer et al. (1990) advocate putting people into new organizational contexts that impose new ideas, responsibilities, and relationships rather than focusing on individual behavior. Weisbord (1987) identifies resistance as a valuable passion that can be channeled more constructively. Johnson (1992) sees resistance as half of a polarity, part of a constant tension between tradition-bearing and crusading. Senge (1990) notes that resistance is neither "capricious [nor] mysterious." He claims that resistance to change occurs when the changers have not identified a balancing process (compensating feedback loop) that needs to be altered in order for the change to be effective. This system is trying to maintain some implicit goal that was not part of the change process.

Although researchers and theorists are currently writing about resistance to change as a systems concept, some are expanding the notion of a system beyond anything Lewin ever described. For Lewin, a system was homeostatic. The dominant feedback loops were negative or compensating, always pushing the system back to equilibrium. Complexity science researchers have highlighted the significance of nonlinear, mutually causal (Dent, 1997) systems in which positive or amplifying feedback loops drive the system. Goldstein (1994) contends that organizations are such nonlinear systems that, by definition, they will seek out change when in far-from-equilibrium conditions. Goldstein refers to dealing with resistance to change as the old model (p. 11).

We call for one final change in work on resistance to change. The mental model, as is, is basically monolithic. Strategies for overcoming resistance to change are offered

regardless of the change intended. Making changes effectively in organizations requires specific, targeted action. If the anticipated change will result in the loss of status by some employees, then the field must research and develop strategies for dealing with the loss of status. Likewise, if the change will result in the loss of jobs, that issue must be dealt with. Labeling these difficult problems as resistance to change only impedes the change effort.

NOTES

1. We would like to thank one of our reviewers for this observation.
2. Dreese's (1955) primary thesis is that resistance to change occurs when people become complacent. He suggests that people have a natural tendency to establish goals and work hard to reach them. However, once those goals have been reached, people will resist further change. Dreese's work will not be further addressed here.

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