Viva La Resistance
By Justin Pinkerman


These are the monikers we attach to the people in our organizations that resist change. Seldom do we speak of the traditionalists in flattering terms. When was the last time you heard a colleague praised for displaying prudence or circumspection? We admire the innovators and futurists, not the purists.

In leadership, impeding change isn’t trendy nowadays. Need evidence? Tune into the national news and watch political opponents jockey for position as the candidate of change. Sameness and stability are out; newness is in vogue.

As leaders, we face the daunting challenge of inspiring change. Consequently, the resistors of change can easily become our chief adversaries. We may see them as obstacles to be rolled aside, pushed uphill, or sidestepped and left to collect dust.

However, if engaged diplomatically, resistors may actually be a boon to leaders of change. By welcoming a degree of resistance, leaders sharpen their message for change, discover organizational rituals in need of preservation, and win over important allies. Before blindly alienating resistors, leaders should consider the possible upside of the loyal opposition.

Resistors Help Leaders to Refine Both the Message and Tactics of Change

"It is not that experience should shape the future but, rather, that such experience should be accessed to help shape the future more effectively."
~ Jeffrey Gandz, Managing Director of the Richard Ivey School of Business

When leaders turn a deaf ear to the experience of resistors, they deprive themselves of valuable repositories of knowledge and insight. Resistors who are veterans within the organization have likely witnessed failed attempts at change and are attuned to political dynamics hidden beneath the surface of the organization. Lively debate with those opposed to change may yield discoveries of previously unforeseen roadblocks. Even if resistors cannot be persuaded to join the cause of change, dialoguing with them refines a leader’s understanding of how to communicate and enact change across the organization.

Resistors are Gatekeepers of Much-Needed Support

Change is notoriously messy. There are nearly always hiccups, delays, and headaches associated with the implementation of new systems. When resistors have not been courted in advance, these speed bumps serve as fuel for dissent. Vocal opponents of change rally behind the setbacks to undermine change.

Leaders are wise to invest time in listening to resistors’ concerns, affirming their opinions, and seeking ways to co-opt them into oncoming changes. Oftentimes resistors can be persuaded by a leader’s patient explanation, attempts at compromise, and personal appeal. By gaining the support of erstwhile detractors, a leader defuses the threat of widespread defiance to change.
Resistors Help Leaders to Preserve Positive Rituals

In a rush to usher in a new era, an incoming leader may unwittingly trample over an organization's established values and cultural heritage. Leaders are responsible to challenge the process and question underlying assumptions, but they are also wise to tread cautiously over the past. By scanning existing structures with a humble eye, they may spot time-honored rituals that promote unity or embody the company's identity.

If engaged on friendly terms rather than as enemy combatants, dissenters to change may be able to offer priceless insights into the power and significance of long-standing traditions. Resistors may be able to champion past practices so that they are integrated into the future rather than completely obliterated. By fighting to preserve what's best of the old order, resistors may actually facilitate the onset of change rather than impeding it.

Ideas for this article were drawn from Jeffrey Gandz's article, "Cherish the Resistors," featured on Ivey Business Journal. To access the article, visit Ivey Business Journal.

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