

## Change Isn't So Hard

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Change always encounters resistance. While our natural instinct may be to fight back against that resistance, I have found that a better path is to lessen the original resistance, rather than trying to surmount it.

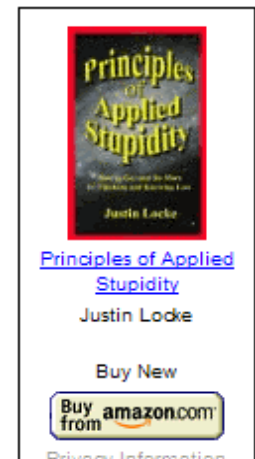
The key to reducing resistance, whether from an individual or an entire organization, is to first understand its emotional underpinnings. Specifically, you want to plan ahead to anticipate how they will *perceive* the extent and impact of the change.



Resistance is not always resistance to the actual change; it might be to a spectacular horror movie loosely based on the change you are proposing. No matter how carefully and logically you present your planned changes, the average person's fear of losing connection and status will cause them to immediately interpret your proposals in terms of the worst-case scenario it could represent for them. People who might otherwise seem quite unimaginative will surprise you with how much they can imagine when they feel threatened.

There are a few ways to avoid this type of overreaction.

The first strategy is to make the change as small as you possibly can. The smaller the change, the less it upsets the current status quo. There is always the temptation to present changes as being wonderfully new, sweeping, and grand, since doing so looks so good. But when push comes to shove, the bigger the perceived change, the bigger the perceived potential threat. So keep it as small as you can. Say it is small, and any overblown reaction to it will seem inappropriate.



The second method of reducing resistance is a preemptive strike – neutralize the most common imagined threats and worst-case scenarios. Do a little thinking and homework, and when you announce the change, point out what will *not* change. This could be a very long list, but if you don't do this, the lack of information will always be interpreted as evidence of the absolute worst-case scenarios of change-resisters. Reinforce the status quo as much as you can.



Another trick to overcoming resistance is to define the problem, but, instead of a solution, just give the parameters of an acceptable solution and then step back and let other stakeholders come up with the change. For example, you can define a problem and say, “Okay, I don’t have a solution, but the solution must do x, must cost no more than y, and take no longer than z.” When the change comes, the people who designed it feel ownership, and they will defend it for you. Besides, they may come up with a better solution than you would have.

Beyond these basic strategies, however, it’s important to understand the five basic reasons why people resist change: membership, rank, loyalty, ritual, and fear of embarrassment.

### **Membership**

Our most important needs are not physiological. Fundamental though those needs are, the highest need of human beings is for basic connection and belonging. People will give up food, sex, and money to achieve and maintain this basic sense of membership. When you want to institute a change, you have to calculate how it will affect everyone’s sense of connection with their family, their coworkers, the organization, and to you.

When dealing with objections, do so one-on-one and not in a huge group meeting. People won’t say they are afraid of losing connection openly. Instead, they will express their fear by attacking the plan itself, and when other people hear this, it will snowball into a festival of “can-you-top-this?” worst-case scenarios. You may be dealing with fear of disconnection, not a logical argument, and attacking brittle logic head on will only make the underlying fear that much worse.

### **Rank**

Another element of resistance is “rank.”

Whether it is a wolf pack, a chicken coop or a troop of baboons, a core aspect of any group is a sense of rank. Those who are highest in the pecking order have the most power and the most to lose from any changes. Therefore, they are the most likely to be resistant to it.

For these high ranking individuals, being asked to adopt and learn something entirely new tends to feel like a demotion. In a sense it is, because they are going from a state of comfort to the scary discomfort of being the new kid on the block. Part of the reason why these people put in the effort to be in a high position is because they cannot bear being in a state of “freshman vulnerability.” If someone feels like the change is a clear demotion to their hard-won status and security, they will either fight it tooth and nail or quit.



The best approach is to keep the pecking order as intact as possible. Even better, imply that this new system is a reward and a sign of their higher status that “they get to do it first.” And if at all possible, go on the “ride” with them . . . accept the sense of demotion that comes with the new system.

There is, however, one last-ditch technique you can try with such folks: Take advantage of the “hero reflex.” You couch the need for change as a threat to the entire group. You tell them that an unpleasant and frightening task – facing a new problem and trying a wholly new solution – is required, and we need a hero to do this terrible job. Of course, you expect your highest-ranking people to be heroes, and the chance to be a hero is hard to pass up when it offers such an opportunity for even higher status. No guarantees that they’ll go for it, but it’s worth a shot.

## **Loyalty**

The next item on the resistance agenda is the issue of loyalty – in this case, loyalty to the past.

Wherever you find people, you will find loyalty. Exactly what people will be loyal to is another subject. Some people are loyal to their country, to their school, to their family, or to all the above. And many people are loyal to traditions in the workplace.

Before you institute a new way of doing things, realize that you are rattling the cage of loyalty to the old system. In order for people to be loyal to your new system, you are asking them to be disloyal to the past system, in effect to betray it. No matter how good your new system, and no matter how lousy the old one, on a gut level the change will just feel wrong – criminal, immoral, even treasonous.

Loyalty does this.

Thinking that you can overcome loyalty to an obsolete system with a purely logical argument is a mistake. Loyalty is emotional, not logical, and it can’t change on a dime. A person’s need to be loyal is always there, so make sure you are managing that loyalty to your advantage.

One way to channel loyalty is to say you are not asking others to be disloyal to the old system; on the contrary, you say your new system is merely reinforcing the ideas they are already loyal to. This might be a good time to remind everyone of their higher ideals, which, for example, might be to pursue “the best client outcome” or “our best customer service.”

## **Ritual**

The fourth element of resistance is the power of ritual.



We have so many rituals in our lives that we tend to take them for granted, but they are there, and they are there for a reason. They reinforce our fragile sense of connection and belonging. Every baseball game begins with the national anthem, every rotary club meeting begins with the Pledge of Allegiance and “God Bless America.” This seems pointless to an outsider, but it isn’t. Collective habits are part of belonging to a culture.

When you are initiating change, you must cope with the inertia of habit. The best way to change a habit is not to fight it, but to substitute another, comparable habit. To do this, I am always persistent. Achieving change via persistence is not a new idea, but here’s a new twist:

Persistence sounds arduous, but it is actually one of the easiest things you can do. The trick is to be mindlessly repetitive and to exert as little effort as possible. You don’t need to explain your new system in a different way each day, come at things from a different angle, make a cogent argument, or even have to listen to all the arguments you hear. Just repeat, repeat, repeat. Boil down the highest priority of your proposed change to one simple phrase, and keep reinforcing it. People will eventually get tired of arguing with you, and they may adopt the new system just to get some peace and quiet. Your new system will become the new habit. Pick your goal carefully though, because once the change becomes a habit, changing *it* will be just as hard!

The key to effective persistence is not to expend a lot of energy on it. Do a very small thing, but do it every single day. Don’t fight the resistance, but wear it down without tiring yourself out.

### **Fear of embarrassment**

Now we get to the negative element that needs to be addressed – fear of embarrassment. Some people will be apprehensive of embracing a change for fear that it will backfire and reflect poorly on them personally.

One thing that is useful when reducing resistance is to make sure that you are willing to be the “fall guy” for the changeover anxiety. People will be hesitant to do new things for fear of “looking stupid” and being the butt of coworker ridicule, but if they can easily point to you and say “I think it’s dumb too, I am doing it because he said to do it,” they are in a state of emotional safety during the changeover period. Let them laugh. As long they are doing the new system, you win.

Finally, a key element of bringing about change is forgiveness.

For example, I am an active social dancer, and occasionally I take a private lesson with a superstar teacher. Invariably, this teacher will point out some basic technical flaw that needs to be fixed – after all, that’s what I’m paying them to do. The problem is that, in



accepting the fact that I need to fix this thing, I also have to deal with the shocking realization that I have been doing this particular thing wrong for 20 years, despite the polite tolerance my partners have displayed. That's a lot of "oops" to swallow in one gulp.

To effectively change someone, both they and you have to forgive past imperfections. Once they've been fixed, don't bring up the past, even in jest. Focus on celebrating and expanding the fabulous new improvements.

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