

Reconstructing Resistance to Change: From Individual to Relationship¹

Jeffrey D. Ford, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus of Management
Max M. Fisher College of Business
The Ohio State University
2100 Neil Avenue
Columbus, OH 43210
614-563-2095
ford.1@osu.edu

¹ Paper presented at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, Anaheim, CA.

While a range of sources are referenced throughout this article, we would like to make special mention of Landmark Worldwide and Werner Erhard whose work and programs have informed and shaped our thinking and without which this paper would not have been possible.

Reconstructing Resistance to Change: From Individual to Relationship

Abstract

Contemporary approaches to resistance to change treat it primarily as an individual based phenomena located “over there, in them”, the change recipients. This paper questions that approach and proposes that resistance is better understood as a relational phenomenon between agent and recipient. As such, resistance is a “co-creation” of agent and recipient and its resolution is relational rather than individual.

It is time to expand our understanding of resistance to change, particularly with regard to its sources and the role of change agents. As others have noted (Dent & Goldberg, 1999a; King & Anderson, 1995; Meston & King, 1996), the predominant approach to resistance takes what has been called a managerialist perspective (Nord & Jermier, 1994) in which the views of change agents and their sponsors are privileged². This perspective is evident as early as the work of Coch and French (1948) where understandings of and explanations for worker responses to change (i.e., “resistance”) were from the view of factory management. Inherent in the managerialist view is a presumption that change agents are doing the right and proper things on behalf of organizations while change recipients throw up unreasonable obstacles or barriers intent on “doing in” or “screwing up” the change (Dent et al., 1999a; Klein, 1976). Change agents, therefore, are portrayed as unfortunate victims that must overcome the irrational and dysfunctional responses of maladjusted change recipients (Nord et al., 1994) to ensure success.

Embedded in the managerialist view is the presumption that “resistance” is an accurate and objective report by unbiased observers of what change recipients are really doing in response to change. In this regard, the view is a realist philosophy where reports of resistance correspond to or mirror reality. Change agents are not, therefore, portrayed as participants who enact their environments (Weick, 1979) or construct realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The possibility that resistance is the change agent’s self-serving or

² For purposes of exposition, we use the term ‘change agent’ to refer to those who are responsible for identifying the need for change, creating a vision and specifying a desired outcome, and then making it happen. They are the people responsible for the formulation and implementation of the change, and include what Kanter, Stern, and Jick (1992) call change strategists and implementers. Change agents, therefore, include those engaged in the actual conduct of the change as well as those who call for and sponsor it. We will use the term ‘change recipients’ to represent those people who are responsible for implementing, adopting, or adapting to the change(s) (Kanter et al, 1992).

self-fulfilling description of the behaviors and communications of change recipients is not considered.

A second presumption of the managerialist view is that change agents do not contribute to the occurrence of resistance through their own actions and inactions resulting from ignorance, incompetence, or mismanagement (e.g., Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990; Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992; Schaffer & Thompson, 1992; Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996). Even where breakdowns in change agent communication or leadership occur, resistance is still seen as residing “over there, in them” (the change recipients) and, because “their” resistance is directed at the change itself, the resistance is independent of the relationship between agent and recipients (Dent et al., 1999a; Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002; King et al., 1995).

Finally, the managerialist view presumes resistance is dysfunctional and detrimental and must be eliminated or overcome (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). It does not consider that resistance is a natural and inherently neutral phenomenon as it is in mechanics and the physical and biological sciences. Nor does it consider that resistance may be the product of rationally coherent strategies and objectives (Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994) even though resistance to persuasion has been found to be the product of thoughtful consideration (e.g., Knowles & Linn, 2004b; Wegener, Petty, Smoak, & Fabrigar, 2004). Also not considered is the possibility that resistance could be a potential contributor to, or resource for, effective change despite the fact that authentic dissent has been shown to be functional in other areas of management (Nemeth, Brown, & Rogers, 2001; Nemeth, Connell, Rogers, & Brown, 2001; Schulz-Hardt, Jochims, & Frey, 2002).

The managerialist view gives us a comedy-tragedy narrative of resistance in which “hero” change agents confront “villain” resisters while engaged in making progressive and beneficial changes on behalf of the organization. This resistance, which is “real”, located “over there, in them” (change recipient³ responses), and in which change agents play or have played no contributory role, has only deleterious effects on change. Change agents, therefore, must overcome these regressive effects if the “heroine” (i.e., change) is to be saved (successful).

Although this story, or forms of it, has become received truth (Dent & Goldberg, 1999b), we agree with those who consider it to be theoretically and practically limited, overly simplistic, and perhaps even misguided (Dent & Goldberg, 1999b; Jermier et al., 1994; King et al., 1995). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to begin the reconstruction of the resistance story by expanding it to include the contributory role of change agents. In so doing, we add not only the agent as a contributor to the occurrence of resistance, but also the agent-recipient relationship. As a result, resistance shifts from being an individual recipient phenomenon to being a relationship phenomenon co-created in the dynamics between agent and recipient.

Adding the Change Agent

Resistance is a form of narrative account – a story – told by agents about the affective, cognitive, and behavioral dispositions and responses (actions and communications) of recipient’s to change. In the managerialist view, this account is presumed to be an objective description of reality. Given this presumption, it is understandable that research has focused on identifying the various forms of resistance in

³ For ease of exposition, the term “individual” refers both to single persons as well as single teams, groups, or units.

which recipients engage, why they resist, and what can prevent or overcome their resistance.

What if this presumption of descriptive objectivity is mistaken? What if the relationship between the descriptive language of agents and the world they describe is not one of correspondence, i.e., their language does not “mirror” reality? This question is of particular importance because if agent accounts do not mirror independent, real-world events and objects, then what provides their warrant? What is the basis for their truth claim regarding resistance?

If the objectivity of agent accounts assumes that descriptive language mirrors the world “as it is”, then, as this assumption comes under increasing challenge from post-modern and critical theories, so too does the presumption of a true and objective portrayal of reality. As a result, the focus shifts from the claim itself to the ideological or motivational basis from which the claim derives, i.e., its underlying intent. When applied to resistance, this means the question of interest shifts from “Why do recipients resist?” to “Why do change agents call ‘that’ resistance?” Along with this shift, change agents move from unbiased reporters to active and interested participants in resistance to change.

Accounts

Narrative accounts are linguistic devices embedded within social action that attempt to make sense of acts, actions, and events to others (Gergen, 1994; Harré, 1980). Their purpose is to make actions intelligible and warrantable by interpreting them as proper parts of the structure of interaction sequences. A form of defensive speaking (Schutz & Baumeister, 1999), accounts are employed to explain behaviors or outcomes,

particularly when there is a gap between action and expectation, in order to help the speaker maintain a favorable relationship with those to whom the account is given (Scott & Lyman, 1968). But not just any account will suffice.

Whether an audience accepts an account depends on the shared background expectancies and understandings of the participants. Since actions only make sense within a particular context, account acceptability hinges on the ability of speakers to create contexts that listeners understand, and appropriately locate their actions within those contexts. Accounts that appeal to what “everyone knows”, for example, have a higher likelihood of being accepted (Scott et al., 1968) than those that don’t.

The giving of accounts raises questions about the objectivity of change agents in attributing unexpected problems or delays to resistance. In fact, the need to offer accounts, particularly in situations of failure, encourages scapegoating (Scott et al., 1968). The literature on self-serving attributions and bias is replete with examples of decision makers at all levels giving accounts that shift blame for failures or poor performance to others in order to make themselves look good (e.g., Bettman & Weitz, 1983; Ford, 1985; Kelley, 1973; Salancik & Meindl, 1984). Unless we are willing to assume change agents are immune to these same attribution tendencies, it is reasonable to expect them to give accounts in which they take credit for successful change while blaming others for problems and failures.

Giving accounts for the problems associated with change, therefore, is a matter of making sense of failures, setbacks, or complaints to an interested audience. As such, invoking “resistance to change” as the source of these problems is both individually and collectively self-serving for change agents because it sustains standardized terminology

and beliefs within the community of change agents, validates the fundamental tenet that people resist change, and absolves or mitigates agent responsibility for the unexpected negative responses to change (Scott et al., 1968). By locating resistance “over there, in them” (i.e., change recipients), change agents shift responsibility for resistance from things under their control (i.e., their own actions) to the characteristics and attributes of change recipients (Caruth, Middlebrook, & Rachel, 1985; Kotter et al., 1979; O’Toole, 1995). In this way, the generic explanation of resistance serves to conceal the specific behaviors and communications of both agents and recipients that lie behind it.

How Change Agents Contribute

The logic of self-serving accounts holds that an actor’s actions are responsible for, or at least contribute to, unfavorable or undesirable outcomes that are subsequently attributed to (blamed on) another. If resistance to change is such an account, then what is it that change agents do, or fail to do, that requires giving such accounts? How do change agents contribute to the resistant responses of recipients?

Breaches of Trust. Change agents contribute to resistant responses by breaking agreements with recipients before and during change and then failing to restore the subsequent loss of trust (Andersson, 1996; Cobb, Wooten, & Folger, 1995; Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997). Agreements, including psychological and implied contracts (Rousseau, 1996; Rousseau, 1995, 1998), are breached whenever agents knowingly or unknowingly renege on a promise or an understood and expected pattern of cooperation (Axelrod, 1984; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1989). Breaches occur when there are changes in the distribution and allocation of resources, the processes and

procedures by which those reallocations are made, or the ways in which people of greater authority interact with those of lesser authority (Shapiro & Kirkman, 1999).

Research on organizational justice shows that when people see themselves as being, and having been treated fairly, they develop attitudes and behaviors associated with successful change (Cobb et al., 1995). However, when people experience injustice or betrayal, they report resentment, a sense of being done to, and a desire for retribution (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999). This can result in such negative behaviors as stealing, lower productivity, lower work quality, and less cooperation (Shapiro et al., 1999), as well as a loss of trust of, obligation toward, and satisfaction with their employer (Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). In extreme cases, people may even seek revenge or retaliation and engage in sabotage, theft, or other aggressive or violent behavior (Benison, 1994; Robinson & Bennett, 1997; Trip & Bies, 1997) in order to “get even” to “balance” perceived mistreatment and injustice.

Many of the responses to injustice have also been identified as forms of resistance (Caruth et al., 1985; Kotter et al., 1979; O'Toole, 1995), suggesting that recipient responses to change may be the result of perceived injustice and broken agreements by change agents. If this is the case, then attributing change difficulties to resistance allows agents to avoid responsibility for breaking the agreements and for restoring trust. Since victims of broken agreements are willing to reconcile and repair a relationship if the offender offers a sincere, formal, and timely apology that clearly admits personal culpability (Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004), the failure of agents to do so persists the difficulty.

This line of research suggests that change agents who repair damaged relationships and restore trust both before and during change are less likely to encounter resistance than agents who do not. Moreover, since past broken agreements have been found to have a negative effect on victims' expectations of future violations (Shapiro et al., 1999; Tomlinson et al., 2004), agents who fail to bring about closure (Albert, 1983, 1984; Albert & Kessler, 1976) are more likely to encounter resistance not only in later phases of current changes, but in subsequent changes as well (Duck, 2001; Knowles et al., 2004b). In this respect, research shows that failing to repair damaged relationships and restore trust leads to cynicism, a tendency to engage in disparaging and critical behaviors toward both change and change agents, to lower work motivation, and to lower commitment (Andersson, 1996; Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998; Reichers et al., 1997).

Communication Breakdowns. Change agents contribute to recipient resistance by failing to legitimize change. According to McGuire's theory of inoculation, change recipients' success in resisting influence is determined by their ability to refute arguments that challenge their prevailing beliefs (McGuire, 1964; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961). Developing counterarguments builds a stronger defense of and rationale for recipient's current perspectives, thereby serving as a form of inoculation against future challenges (Tormala & Petty, 2004). Inoculation theory and its supporting research (Compton & Pfau, 2004; Pfau & Burgoon, 1988; Wan & Pfau, 2004) suggests that change agents who do not provide strong, well-developed and compelling justifications that overcome the potential and prevailing counterarguments of recipients, or fail to demonstrate the validity of those justifications, end up inoculating recipients thus increasing their immunity not

only to the current change, but to future ones as well (Knowles et al., 2004b). Consistent with this reasoning, Larson (2005) has shown that change agents undermine the power of their justifications by being ambivalent. By using the rhetoric of the new while engaging in the practices of the old, or advocating the value of the new while praising the success of the old, agents send an inconsistent message which gives recipients greater certainty and confidence in what arguments to use against the change while simultaneously undermining their own ability to effectively counter those arguments (Quereshi & Strauss, 1980; Tormala et al., 2004).

As a practical matter, agents are encouraged to communicate frequently and enthusiastically about change (Lewis, Schmisseur, Stephens, & Weir, 2006). Yet in doing so, agents run the risk of misrepresenting the change. In some cases, such misrepresentations may be intentional in order to induce recipients' participation, to look good, or to avoid losing face and looking bad (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, & Wyer, 1996). But in other cases, misrepresentations are unintentional, such as those resulting from a bias toward optimism (Lovallo & Kahneman, 2003). Nevertheless, as change unfolds and recipients compare actual results to the original promises and projections, unfavorable differences can result in perceptions of misrepresentation, injustice, and violations of trust (Folger et al., 1999; Tomlinson et al., 2004), undermining agent credibility and adding to recipient resistance (Folger et al., 1999). Agents can reduce the chances of such accusations by being as truthful, realistic, and accurate in their depiction of the change as possible, including revealing what they do not know. Schweigger and DeNisi (1991), for example, found that a realistic merger preview – a complete and authentic explanation of both the positive and negative outcomes of a merger – reduced

the uncertainty change recipients had about change and increased their ability to cope with it.

Finally, agents can affect resistance by failing to listen to the ideas, proposals, and counteroffers submitted by recipients. Research on procedural and interactional justice (Folger et al., 1999; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998) indicates that if change agents fail to treat the communications of change recipients as genuine and legitimate, or as extensions and translations of the change, they may be seen as “not listening” and “being defensive” by change recipients. Such defensiveness is likely when recipient responses suggest more effort may be required to accomplish the change than was originally planned, that there may be undesirable budget or other performance impacts, or when the change agent has career consequences associated with the success of the change (King et al., 1995). The cost of defensiveness is the persistence of resistance and its escalation in a vicious cycle in which resistance (i.e., being defensive) begets resistance (Powell & Posner, 1978).

Responding to Agent?

If, as proposed here, agent’s actions and inactions contribute to recipient response to change, then what agents call “resistance to change” should more accurately be called “resistance to change and/or change agent”. Such an interpretation, which is consistent with the justice and leadership literatures, suggests the need for different resistance reduction strategies. For example, if recipients are doubtful of a change because they distrust agents, then any attempts to address the distrust, including education or involvement (Kotter et al., 1979), may be seen as coercive or manipulative. Under these

conditions, agents may make attributions to the ineffectiveness of the resolution strategy itself, or to the virulence of recipient resistance, while ignoring their own contribution.

Adding Relationship

If, as Weick (1979) proposes, the basic units of organizing are the interact and double interact, then resistance cannot be a “one-sided”, individual response located only in the recipient. Rather, it must be a function of the interactions that shape, and are shaped by, the nature and quality of the agent-recipient relationship. Indeed, the proposition that agents contribute to the ways recipients respond to change implies as much.

Relationship

A relationship can be understood as a context of background conversations against which explicit, foreground actions and communications, such as those in the initiation and implementation of change, occur (Ford et al., 2002). Background conversations are a product of experiences and traditions, both direct and inherited, that provide a space of possibilities and influence the way people listen to what is said and what is unsaid (Berger et al., 1966; Harré, 1980; Heidegger, 1971; Winograd & Flores, 1987). This context shapes the meaning of what is said and whether a particular speaking (including action) is correct or incorrect, appropriate or inappropriate (Wittgenstein, 1958). The narratives in which people are located are part of what shapes this context (Gergen, 1994).

Who we are for ourselves (i.e., our identity) is a function of our self-narrative – the story we tell about our life experiences and ourselves in order to be related to others. Self-narratives, however, are not simply derivatives of past encounters reassembled

within existing relationships. Rather, we ongoingly negotiate and make sense of them within a network or community of other self-narratives. For this reason, maintaining and sustaining an identity, i.e., a reputation, is a never ending endeavor. Challenges are presented that must be addressed for the confirmation or modification of the identity, i.e., who I am. In this process of establishing and maintaining an identity, a reputation is created which defines and secures a relational future and future interdependence within a social set or community (Gergen, 1994; Harré, 1980).

Who we are both to and for others, therefore, is a function of the multiplicity of narratives and reputations within which we are located. Within different communities or social sets, we have different reputations (roles), created and maintained in the network of relationships and conversations that constitute the social set. Who we “are” as a spouse, as a parent, as a neighbor, or an employee is a function of our relationships with those involved and the narratives that constitute and maintain those identities and relationships. As a result, our identity is not so much a personal characteristic as it is a relational one that determines how people know and relate to us, i.e., what they can expect. It is for this reason that a person known as (i.e., to have the reputation or social identity of) a “tyrant boss” in one community or social set can also be known as a “caring father” in another set. The characterization is not a personal trait, but rather a relational one.

In all social identities, therefore, the actions of others become a potentially integral part of our self-narratives (Gergen, 1994). In order to convey how honest I am, for example, I may relate how I successfully resisted temptations to engage in something dishonest. To show how competent and capable I am, I may talk about succeeding at

something where other people with similar credentials failed. In each of these cases, “honest” and “competent” are established in narrative comparisons to others, and, to the extent others accept and talk about them as aspects of “me”, they form a basis for how “I” will be interacted with in the future, i.e., they create a relational future.

Resistance is Relational

Just as no event is dramatic irrespective of its relational context, so too no behavior or communication is resistance irrespective of its relational context. The capacity of an event to produce a sense of drama, for example, is a function of its relationship among events, not the events themselves. A fire, in and of itself, is not dramatic. But a large, fast moving fire in a home with young children and elderly people asleep and only one escape route is. Why? Because of the event’s relation to other factors.

There are no precise characteristics of the world, any public material events, behaviors, or communications that are, in and of themselves, resistance. Rather, resistance is the result of sensemaking in which agents extract (i.e., bracket) particular recipient responses and put them within a relational context within which assigning them the label of resistance is appropriate. Resistance, therefore, is the label of an abstract category, like that of “financial assets”, to which agents assign the specific actions and communications at specific times and in specific places by specific individuals based on the relational assessment, evaluation, and interpretation of agents. That this is the case is evidenced in part by the realization that responses considered as resistance in one context are not in another (Eccles, Nohria, & Berley, 1992; Kelman & Warwick, 1973). Young (2000), for example, found that managers who had been labeled resistant actually saw

their actions to be supporting, not undermining the organization's goals. Whether agents consider recipient responses resistance, therefore, appears to depend on the relational context in which the agent places them, not the responses themselves.

Declaring responses “resistance” not only categorizes the actions, it simultaneously defines the social identity and reputation of the recipient(s) engaged in those actions as “resistant”. In so doing, it creates a relational future between agent and recipient based in dealing with and overcoming the resistance. As a result, recipients and agents will engage in actions that attempt to renegotiate the new reputation and in so doing, confirm or alter the narrative of which both are now part. The outcome will create yet another relational future and context.

Invoking Resistance is Functional

Given its relational impact, why would agents invoke the label of resistance? Why would they call ‘that’ resistance? (Meston et al., 1996) Because it is functional to do so.

Resistance is a “way of talking” about the responses of recipients that has illocutionary power and allows agents to take and justify actions they might not otherwise take. In this respect, resistance is functional in the same way a problem is functional (Weick, 1995). Problems are characterized by a kind of gap, difference, or disparity between the way things are and the way one wants them to be. Problems do not exist as an objective state-of-the-world, but rather as a “relationship of disharmony” between reality and one's preferences for the way things should or ought to be. They are abstract concepts with no physical existence but are invented and applied as attention focusing

devices. Constructing (formulating) problems serves a useful function in advancing one's intentions and objectives because a problem's formulation constrains its solution.

Resistance is a form of regressive narrative (Gergen, 1994), a story in which things are not going the way they should or ought to go, at least from the agent's point of view. Given that change agents are expected to "make things happen" and that failing to do so may reflect negatively on their competence, invoking resistance is one way in which to formulate the problem they confront.

Gergen (1994) proposes that regressive narratives can serve a compensatory function in that a tale of woe can solicit attention, sympathy, and intimacy. To relate a story of resistance, therefore, is not to admit to ineffectiveness, but to engage in a particular kind of relationship with other agents that may solicit pity and concern, excuse the agent from failure, and deliver punishment to the recipient. When other agents learn of the threatening situation, it can operate as a "call to action" to compensate and turn things around through renewed effort and application of resources. Declaring resistance, therefore, can serve as an important means for motivating others, for freeing up resources, and for using strategies that agents might not otherwise consider appropriate. In this respect, invoking resistance privileges the agent's point of view and justifies various uses of power that maintain agent identity.

Morrison and Robinson (1997) suggest agents may label recipient responses resistance is because they feel the recipients' actions constitute a failure to honor and fulfill their psychological contracts. If this is the case, then agents may label some actions resistance not because the actions are necessarily harmful to the change, but because agents consider them contrary to what should be done, what is right, or what is

appropriate. Accordingly, whether or not a particular response constitutes resistance depends on the agent's moral or normative perspectives.

Because change is often associated with greater urgency, pressure, and risk than normal organization activities (Kotter, 1995), agents may be less tolerant of and more frustrated by actions habitually displayed by recipients. Labeling these actions resistance provides agents a readily accepted justification for operating in different and potentially more aggressive ways, thereby signaling that the game has changed and that certain behaviors are unacceptable, at least during the change. If this is the case, agents may assign the label resistance not because the actions are necessarily peculiar or harmful to the change, but to provide themselves with greater degrees of freedom in the way they deal with recipients.

Finally, invoking resistance may serve yet another function – getting ambivalent agents out of the task of implementing a change. The managerialist view assumes agents are unequivocal in their support for and commitment to a change. This, however, may not be the case (Larson et al., 2005; Piderit, 2000). Ambivalent agents may find resistance a useful ally in, and cover for, not pushing forward for a change that they do not fully support.

Whether or not agents label particular actions and communications resistance, therefore, depends on the relationship of those actions and communications to those of other recipients as well as to the normative expectations of agents. If this is the case, then resistance is not really “over there, in them”, but rather is a function of agent beliefs regarding how recipients should respond and whether or not such responses compare favorably with those of other recipients. At its most base level, resistance boils down to

being anything recipients do or do not do that agents think they should or should not do, or want them to do or not do. If some agents don't think recipients should ask "tough questions", then asking such questions may end up being labeled resistance by those agents, and not by other agents.

Relational Pasts and Futures

Change is an interruption that calls into question existing relational futures and portends new, ambiguous and uncertain relational futures; futures in which who I am has yet to be determined. Accordingly, the detritus of prior changes, as well as the ongoing dynamics of ordinary organizational life, serve to define the current relationship between agent and recipient. For example, research has shown that the failure of agents to complete or close past changes can result in cynicism toward them as well as toward future changes.

In this case, there is yet another element to resistance stemming from the current agent-recipient relationship. The relationship between agent and recipient will create expectations against which the agent will evaluate actions, draw conclusions, etc. Expectations such as those found in self-fulfilling prophecies and the Pygmalion effect will affect sense making and bracketing (Eden, 1984, 1988; Madon, Jussim, & Eccles, 1997; Watzlawick, 1984). Accordingly, research shows that expectations regarding the ability and potential of others influence the assessments of their performance and subsequent treatment by authority figures (e.g., teachers, leaders) (Berger et al., 1966; Eden, 1988; Eden & Shani, 1982)

The work on self-fulfilling prophecies and the Pygmalion effect suggests that change agents and recipients will enter an organizational change expecting things from

each other in terms of how each will act and interact. Interactions in the change will either confirm or disconfirm those expectations, and outcomes that differ from what agents and recipients expect may create problems. Expectations of resistance “set up” (predispose?) change agents to look for and find it, thereby confirming its existence, validating their expectations, and sustaining the received truth that people resist change.

This suggests that resistance is not necessarily something that catches agents “off guard”. Within any organization, there are a variety of actions such as foot dragging, failing to follow procedures, being late for or missing meetings, complaining, gossiping, failing to perform, etc. that are endemic, albeit in varying degrees, in all organizations. These normal, everyday actions are a function of many factors, such as leadership style, reward systems, group dynamics, interpersonal conflicts, etc. and not necessarily related to a specific change. Because they are normal, they are likely to be part of any relational future between agents and recipients (with the exception of external agents) as well as of the reputations of recipients and thus a basis for expectations. In fact, it is reasonable to expect recipients will engage in those same responses during change, since they are responses that are, based on reputation, predictable. Still, these everyday actions are cited by change agents as evidence of resistance to change (e.g., Caruth et al., 1985; O'Toole, 1995).

Discussion

A reconstruction of resistance based on the arguments presented here implies that we can understand what is currently considered “resistance to change” as a dynamic among three elements. One element is “recipient response” which is any behavior or communication recipients display in response to change and its implementation. This

element has been the primary focus of extant resistance literature. The second element is “agent action”, which includes agents’ interpretations of, and meanings given to, actual or anticipated recipient responses. The third element is the “agent-recipient relationship” that provides the context in which the first two elements occur and which shapes, and is shaped by, agent-recipient interactions.

The idea that resistance is relational allows us to shift attention away from the psychology of the recipient and examine the quality and dynamics of the relationship between agent and recipient and the context in which agents make their determinations of resistance. This is not to say that recipients cannot and do not have a variety of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward changes or those who sponsor them: clearly, they do (Piderit, 2000). Approach-avoidance theory (Knowles & Linn, 2004a) tells us people can be simultaneously for (approach) and against (avoid) change. For example, research has shown that people with high quality employment relationships have both positive and negative views toward change (Kim & Rousseau, 2006).

By saying that resistance is relational, we mean that observable recipient responses are the triggers for agent sensemaking, that this sensemaking occurs within the context of existing relations, and that the outcome of this sensemaking is the labeling of responses as resistance. In this way, resistance (and its assumed causes) is a product of the relationship “in between” agents and recipients, and not a purely individual phenomenon residing over there in the recipients of change. Furthermore, why agents call some responses resistance and others not is because it is functional to do so.

It is possible, therefore, for recipients to be “internally” positive toward a change, while simultaneously taking actions or delivering communications that change agents call

resistance. It also possible for recipients to be “internally” ambivalent, or even negative, while taking actions that agents do not call resistance. Agents, of course, may make sense of these actions by attributing them to unseen, but hypothesized “private” or “internal” motivations, which they then seek to redress through various resistance reducing strategies (Knowles et al., 2004b).

A second implication of this reconstruction is that there is no resistance to change as an independent phenomenon, but only as a product of sensemaking that occurs in the context of a given set of relationships. This does not mean that recipients do not have reactions to change, nor that their actions cannot have an adverse impact on change – they do and they can. What it does mean, however, is that none of these actions/reactions are, in and of themselves, resistance and they do not become resistance unless and until a change agent assigns the label “resistance” to them.

A third implication of our reconstruction is that what is currently called “overcoming resistance” is an issue of agents effectively managing the agent-recipient relationship. One thing that may support agents in “overcoming resistance” is their willingness to be responsible for their own participation in that relationship, including their own sensemaking. When agents are willing to see “resistance” as a product of their own actions and interactions, including their sensemaking, thus taking more responsibility for their role in its occurrence, they are free to choose more empowering and effective interpretations of recipient actions. For example, from a conversational perspective, a change initiative can be seen as a request that can be declined or counter-offered (Goss, 1996; Winograd et al., 1987). When someone declines a request to make a change, they are saying, “I’m not going to do that.” When they counteroffer, they are

saying, “I am willing to do that, but X,” where “X” is the concession they ask as a condition for accepting the request. In either case, the failure to accept wholeheartedly the request to make a change could be interpreted by agents as resistance.

A counteroffer, however, is a move in a conversation made by someone who is willing and receptive to the request, yet seeking some accommodation. Seeking an accommodation may sound like too many questions or even like challenges, objections, or complaints. If agents interpret such questions from recipients as refusals to accommodate, participate, or contribute to the change, they forfeit the opportunity to consider the counteroffer being proposed. Agents can deliberately choose to make sense of recipient questions, complaints, etc., by listening as if to counteroffers that can update and refine the change to be more successful.

Relationships, of course, are dynamic and can vary over the duration of a change. Kim and Rousseau (2006), for example, found that although recipients with high quality employment relationships were more likely to conform to the new norms created by a change than those with low quality relationships, change instrumentality, not employment relationship quality, was related to recipients’ initial participation in change. Since change instrumentality is a function of the credibility of agent communications, these findings suggest that the quality of the agent-recipient relationship may be more important in early, rather than later stages of change. Their findings also suggest that high quality agent-recipient relationships are likely to result in fewer instances of agents labeling recipient actions resistance than low quality relationships.

The change agent’s job, therefore, must surely include responsibility for the relationship with recipients as well as the tactics of change implementation. Along with

this comes the need to develop new tools that acknowledge the agent's role in resistance and assists them to (1) repair trust resulting from broken agreements, (2) address and resolve issues of mistreatment or injustice, (3) admit mistakes or take other actions that restore credibility, or (4) complete and bring closure to the past. Resistance then, in the restructuring proposed here, becomes an outdated, "individual" concept that ignores the agent-recipient relationship. Our challenge, then, is to expand our understanding so that the totality of resistance is engaged. In so doing, we avoid attributing too much weight to either recipient or agent actions and communications while finding a balance that describes how they interact to form situational expressions of "resistance to change" (Larson et al., 2005).

References

- Albert, S. 1983. The sense of closure. In K. Gergen, & M. Gergen (Eds.), *Historical social psychology*: 159-172. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Albert, S. 1984. A delete design model for successful transitions. In J. Kimberly & R. Quinn (Ed.), *Managing organizational transitions*: 169-191. Homewood, IL: Irwin.
- Albert, S., & Kessler, S. 1976. Processes for ending social encounters: The conceptual archeology of a temporal place. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 6: 147-170.
- Andersson, L. M. 1996. Employee cynicism: An examination using a contract violation framework. *Human Relations*, 49: 1395-1417.
- Axelrod, R. 1984. *The evolution of cooperation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Beer, M., Eisenstat, R., & Spector, B. 1990. Why change programs don't produce change. *Harvard Business Review*, 67(6): 158-166.
- Benisom, H. F. 1994. Crisis and disaster management: Violence in the workplace. *Training and Development*, 48(1): 27-32.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. 1966. *The social construction of reality*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bettman, J., & Weitz, B. 1983. Attributions in the board room: Causal reasoning in corporate annual reports. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28(2): 165-183.
- Caruth, D., Middlebrook, B., & Rachel, F. 1985. Overcoming resistance to change. *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 50(3): 23-27.

- Cobb, A. T., Wooten, K. C., & Folger, R. 1995. Justice in the making: Toward understanding the theory and practice of justice in organizational change and development. In W. A. Pasmore, & R. W. Woodman (Eds.), *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, Vol. 8: 243-295. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Coch, L., & French, J. R. P. 1948. Overcoming resistance to change. *Human Relations*, 1(4): 512-532.
- Compton, J. A., & Pfau, M. 2004. Use of inoculation to foster resistance to credit card marketing targeting college students. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 32(4): 343-364.
- Dean, J. W., Brandes, P., & Dharwadkar, R. 1998. Organizational cynicism. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(2): 341-352.
- Dent, E., & Goldberg, S. 1999a. Challenging "resistance to change". *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 35(1): 25-41.
- Dent, E. B., & Goldberg, S. G. 1999b. Resistance to change: A limiting perspective. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 35(1): 45-47.
- DePaulo, B. M., Kashy, D. A., Kirkendol, S. E., & Wyer, M. M. 1996. Lying in everyday life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70: 979-995.
- Duck, J. D. 2001. *The Change Monster: The human forces that fuel or foil corporate transformation & change*. New York: Crown Business.
- Eccles, R. G., Nohria, N., & Berley, J. D. 1992. *Beyond the hype: Rediscovering the essence of management*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

- Eden, D. 1984. Self-fulfilling prophecy as a management tool: Harnessing Pygmalion. *Academy of Management Review*, 9(1): 64-73.
- Eden, D. 1988. Creating expectation effects in OD: Applying self-fulfilling prophecy. In W. A. Pasmore, & R. W. Woodman (Eds.), *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, Vol. 2: 235-267. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Eden, D., & Shani, A. B. 1982. Pygmalion goes to boot camp: Expectancy, leadership, and trainee performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 67: 194-199.
- Folger, R., & Skarlicki, D. P. 1999. Unfairness and resistance to change: Hardship as mistreatment. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12(1): 35-50.
- Ford, J. D. 1985. The effects of causal attributions on decision makers' responses to performance downturns. *Academy of Management Review*, 10: 770-786.
- Ford, J. D., Ford, L. W., & McNamara, R. 2002. Resistance and the background conversations of change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 15(1): 105-121.
- Gergen, K. J. 1994. *Realities and relationships: Soundings in social construction*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Goss, T. 1996. *The last word on power*. New York: Currency Doubleday.
- Harré, R. 1980. *Social being: A theory for social psychology*. Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams & Co.
- Heidegger, M. 1971. *On the way to language* (P. Hertz, Trans.). San Francisco, CA: Harper Row.
- Jermier, J. M., Knights, D., & Nord, W. R. 1994. Resistance and power in organizations: Agency, subjectivity and the labour process. In J. M. Jermier, D. Knights, & W.

- R. Nord (Eds.), *Resistance and power in organizations*: 1-24. New York: Routledge.
- Kanter, R. M., Stein, B. A., & Jick, T. D. 1992. *The challenge of organizational change: How companies experience it and leaders guide it*. New York: Free Press.
- Kelley, H. 1973. The process of causal attribution. *American Psychologist*, 28(2): 107-128.
- Kelman, H. C., & Warwick, D. P. 1973. Bridging micro and macro approaches to social change: A social-psychological perspective. In G. Zaltman (Ed.), *Processes and phenomena of social change*: 13-59. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kim, T. G., & Rousseau, D. M. 2006. From novelty to routine: Employee motivational shifts across phases of organizational change. Newark: University of Delaware.
- King, N., & Anderson, N. 1995. *Innovation and change in organizations*. London: Routledge.
- Klein, D. 1976. Some notes on the dynamics of resistance to change: The defender role. In W. G. Bennis, K. D. Benne, R. Chin, & K. E. Corey (Eds.), *The planning of change (3rd ed.)*: 117-124. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Knowles, E. S., & Linn, J. A. 2004a. Approach-avoidance model of persuasion: Alpha and omega strategies for change. In E. S. Knowles, & J. A. Linn (Eds.), *Resistance and persuasion*: 117-148. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Knowles, E. S., & Linn, J. A. 2004b. The importance of resistance to persuasion. In E. S. Knowles, & J. A. Linn (Eds.), *Resistance and Persuasion*: 3-9. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Kotter, J. 1995. Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 73(2): 59-67.
- Kotter, J., & Schlesinger, L. 1979. Choosing strategies for change. *Harvard Business Review*, 57(2): 106-114.
- Larson, G. S., & Tompkins, P. K. 2005. Ambivalence and resistance: A study of management in a concertive control system. *Communication Monographs*, 72(1): 1-21.
- Lewis, L. K., Schmisser, A. M., Stephens, K. K., & Weir, K. E. 2006. Advice on communicating during organizational change. *Journal of Business Communication*, 43(2): 113-137.
- Lovullo, D., & Kahneman, D. 2003. Delusions of success: How optimism undermines executive decisions. *Harvard Business Review*, 81(7): 56+.
- Madon, S., Jussim, L., & Eccles, J. 1997. In search of the powerful self-fulfilling prophecy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72(4): 791-809.
- McGuire, W. J. 1964. Inducing resistance to persuasion: Some contemporary approaches. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental and social psychology*, Vol. 1: 191-229. New York: Academic Press.
- McGuire, W. J., & Papageorgis, D. 1961. The relative efficacy of various types of prior belief-defense in producing immunity against persuasion. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 62: 327-337.
- Meston, C., & King, N. 1996. Making sense of "resistance": Responses to organizational change in a private nursing home for the elderly. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 5(1): 91-102.

- Morrison, E. W., & Robinson, S. L. 1997. When employees feel betrayed: A model of how psychological contract violation develops. *Academy of Management Review*, 22(1): 226-256.
- Nemeth, C. J., Brown, K. S., & Rogers, J. D. 2001. Devil's advocate versus authentic dissent: Stimulating quantity and quality. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31: 707-720.
- Nemeth, C. J., Connell, J. B., Rogers, J. D., & Brown, K. S. 2001. Improving decision making by means of dissent. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 31(1): 48-58.
- Nord, W. N., & Jermier, J. M. 1994. Overcoming resistance to resistance: Insights from a study of shadows. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 17(Winter): 396-409.
- O'Toole, J. 1995. *Leading change: Overcoming the ideology of comfort and the tyranny of custom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Pfau, M., & Burgoon, M. 1988. Inoculation in political campaign communication. *Human Communication Research*, 15(1): 91-111.
- Piderit, S. K. 2000. Rethinking resistance and recognizing ambivalence: A multidimensional view of attitudes toward an organizational change. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(4): 783-794.
- Powell, G., & Posner, B. Z. 1978. Resistance to change reconsidered: Implications for managers. *Human Resource Management*, 17(1): 29-34.
- Quereshi, M. Y., & Strauss, L. A. 1980. Immunization of a controverted belief through group discussion. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 8(2): 229-232.
- Reichers, A., Wanous, J., & Austin, J. 1997. Understanding and managing cynicism about organizational change. *Academy of Management Executive*, 11(1): 48-59.

- Robinson, S. L. 1996. Trust and breach of the psychological contract. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(4): 574-599.
- Robinson, S. L., & Bennett, R. J. 1997. Workplace deviance: Its definition, its nature and its causes. In R. J. Lewicki, B. H. Sheppard, & R. J. Bies (Eds.), *Research on negotiation in organizations*, Vol. 6: 3-27. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Robinson, S. L., & Morrison, E. W. 1995. Organizational citizenship behavior: A psychological perspective. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 16: 289-298.
- Robinson, S. L., & Rousseau, D. M. 1994. Violating the psychological contract: Not the exception but the norm. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15(245-259).
- Rousseau, D. 1996. Changing the deal while keeping the people. *Academy of Management Executive*, 10(1): 50-59.
- Rousseau, D. M. 1989. Psychological and implied contracts in organizations. *Employee responsibilities and rights journal*, 2(121-139).
- Rousseau, D. M. 1995. *Psychological contracts in organizations: Understanding written and unwritten agreements*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rousseau, D. M. 1998. The 'problem' of the psychological contract considered. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 19: 665-671.
- Salancik, G., & Meindl, J. 1984. Corporate attributions as strategic illusions of management control. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 29(2): 238-254.
- Schaffer, R., & Thompson. 1992. Successful change programs begin with results. *Harvard Business Review*, 70(1): 80-89.
- Schulz-Hardt, S., Jochims, M., & Frey, D. 2002. Productive conflict in group decision making: Genuine and contrived dissent as strategies to counteract biased

- information seeking. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 88(2): 563-586.
- Schutz, A., & Baumeister, R. F. 1999. The language of defense: Linguistic patterns in narratives of transgressions. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 18(3): 269-286.
- Schweiger, D. M., & DeNisi, A. S. 1991. Communication with employees following a merger: A longitudinal field experiment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 34(1): 110-135.
- Scott, M., & Lyman, S. 1968. Accounts. *American Sociological Review*, 33: 46-62.
- Shapiro, D. L., & Kirkman, B. L. 1999. Employees' reaction to the change to work teams: The influence of "anticipatory" injustice. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 12(1): 51-66.
- Spreitzer, G. M., & Quinn, R. E. 1996. Empowering middle managers to be transformational leaders. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 32(3): 237-261.
- Tomlinson, E. C., Dineen, B. R., & Lewicki, R. J. 2004. The road to reconciliation: Antecedents of victim willingness to reconcile following a broken promise. *Journal of Management*, 30(2): 165-187.
- Tormala, Z. L., & Petty, R. E. 2004. Resisting persuasion and attitude certainty: A meta-cognitive analysis. In E. S. Knowles, & J. A. Linn (Eds.), *Resistance and persuasion*: 65-82. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Trip, T. M., & Bies, R. J. 1997. What's Good about Revenge? The Avenger's Perspective. In R. J. Lewicki, B. H. Shepard, & R. J. Bies (Eds.), *Research on negotiation in organizations*, Vol. 6: 145-160. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

- Wan, H.-H., & Pfau, M. 2004. The relative effectiveness of inoculation, bolstering, and combined approaches in crisis communication. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 16(3): 310-328.
- Watzlawick, P. 1984. Self-fulfilling prophecies. In P. Watzlawick (Ed.), *The invented reality*: 95-116. New York: Norton.
- Wegener, D. T., Petty, R. E., Smoak, N. D., & Fabrigar, L. R. 2004. Multiple routes to resisting attitude change. In E. S. Knowles, & J. A. Linn (Eds.), *Resistance and persuasion*: 13-38. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Weick, K. 1979. *The social psychology of organizing* (2 ed.). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Weick, K. 1995. *Sensemaking in organizations*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Whitener, E. M., Brodt, S. E., Korsgaard, M. A., & Werner, J. M. 1998. Managers as initiators of trust: An exchange relationship framework for understanding managerial trustworthy behavior. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(3): 513-530.
- Winograd, T., & Flores, F. 1987. *Understanding computers and cognition: A new foundation for design*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1958. *Philosophical investigations* (G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Young, A. P. 2000. "I'm just me": A study of managerial resistance. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 13(4): 375-388.