

Knowledge in Action – Issue 38

Embracing difference: three strategies for change agents

For change agents, resistance to change is a fact of everyday life. But how best to respond? Ignoring it, pushing back, or trying to suppress it, can be counterproductive. Instead, Henley Forum research suggests a better strategy: respond with empathic sensitivity, in order to gain insight into how different interpretations make a meaningful difference to involvement in change.

Combining insights from academic literature with practical techniques for investigating difference, and integrating its good points into progress towards change, this Henley Forum research is built on the experiences of real-life change agents delivering change in real-life workplaces. The result: practical and actionable alternative strategies for countering resistance to change.





In any change programme, the change agents leading the change generally expect to encounter resistance. How best to respond? Conventional change management methodologies treat resistance as a phenomenon that needs to be dealt with en masse. In practice, they are evolving reactions to differences that are inherent in change, which should be 'surfaced' locally, re-evaluated, and reframed in order to identify where possibilities lie.

A Henley Forum research inquiry into the lessons learned by participants in a Henley Forum Research Summit examined which techniques change agents found useful within the workplace for surfacing reactions, respecting the value of difference, and reconsidering possibilities to generate positive energy for the change.

The bottom line: rather than suppressing difference in order to repress resistance, it is more productive for change agents to be sensitive to nuances in context, and to use tools to challenge preconceptions and work to integrate diverse perspectives into the way forward. Perceptions of change are deeply personal, and a process of helping people to reframe their interpretation of change may lead to more useful outcomes.

Going from 'Yes, but...' to 'Yes, and..'

Reconfiguring the roles, routines, and rhythms of work is invariably disruptive. Demands to do things differently tend to upset people's accustomed behavioural patterns, their sense of security, and their

"People are different. This is important. To drive change, we must understand perceived threats and use tools to move everyone towards success."

Henley Forum change agent



emotional equanimity. Some individuals and groups react positively to the prospect of change, while others respond negatively, resisting the proposed change.

Five members of the Henley Forum joined Henley Business School's Professor Jane McKenzie and Dr Sharon Varney for a one-day Research Summit in October 2017. Entitled 'Embracing Difference', it set out to consider, through the relevant academic literature, alternative strategies for understanding the different perspectives on change that emerge during organisational change programmes, and 'surfacing' challenging reactions that could be interpreted as resistance.

The goal: exploring ways in which change agents can build an acceptance of different ways of working, aiming to understand the rationale for resisting change, and how the value of different perspectives can contribute to reconsidering interpretations of change, and thereby respond to it in a more positive and participatory manner.

During the workshop, participants explored the reasons why individuals might react differently to change, and practised a number of techniques for translating that reaction into a recognition of alternative possibilities. In particular, they considered:

- The reasons for resistance, and how emotional responses to change help to shape these reasons. **Who** is resisting it, **why** are they resisting it, and **when** are they resisting it?
- How personal sensemaking processes tend to influence individuals' different reactions to change, and how everyone sees change differently; with their perspective coloured by viewing change through the prism of their own experiences and emotions.
- How communicating about difference in turn affects sensemaking, and how perspectives on change can be affected by meaningful conversations and structured questioning.
- How to help people to recognise, accept, and constructively use difference during the change process, by challenging limiting assumptions, working through the underlying causes of resistance, and reframing individuals' interpretation of the implications of change.

Equipped with full instructions on how to use each of the techniques practised during the Summit, the five participants then spent three months working with the challenges of promoting and facilitating organisational change back in their workplaces.

The five participants were then interviewed by Professor Jane McKenzie. How had the insights and techniques that they had acquired during the workshop affected change agents' response to facilitating the change processes in question? Three important learning points emerged.

Collaboration, insight... practical value

Co-ordinated by Professor Jane McKenzie and Dr Sharon Varney of Henley Business School, the insights described here originated in a Henley Forum research inquiry undertaken during autumn 2017. Based around real-life change initiatives in five leading organisations, the project team included representatives from United Utilities, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Environment Agency, and Lloyds Banking Group.

Empathy is a crucial change agent tool

Consciously remembering that perceptions of change are deeply personal is key for effective intervention. Sensitivity to and empathy with the reasons behind people's reactions to difference can be an important tool: if change agents adapt their approach accordingly, it can make it easier to get people on board.

Group- and individual-level tools, such as maps and structured inquiry techniques, help to 'surface' reactions and constructively integrate different points of view into a way forward, and also help change agents to resist any natural inclination to ignore or suppress resistance. It is important to remember that everyone sees change differently, and although their perspective on a given change will be influenced by their past experiences and their innate psychological makeup, they may have valuable insights that need to be taken into consideration.

Showing sensitivity and understanding towards different points of view gives insight into the underlying inhibitors to changing. This in turn provides an opening to facilitate a reinterpretation of what change could mean, and hence encourage a more receptive approach.

Maps, metaphors, and meaningful conversations

Change agents used maps, metaphors and mechanisms for facilitating meaningful conversations as bridges to encourage people to work out how to sense opportunities and seize the positive possibilities of change.

Empathy maps are one well-established tool used by marketeers to help them to 'get inside' their customers' minds. Two useful videos¹ provide a flavour of what empathy maps comprise, along with some ideas about how to use them. If the word 'customer' in these videos seems odd, simply replace it with words such as 'client' or 'colleague'.

Emotion maps are a way of visually expressing how people feel about things, rather than simply categorising those things as 'good' or 'bad'. Understanding such emotions is important, because in Professor Alan Watkins catchy phrase, "E-motion is energy in motion"². Positive emotions encourage motion towards something different, negative emotions can trigger a move away from difference. Resistance may not stem from an objective assessment of whether difference is good or bad.

The participating change agents found that Plutchik's emotion wheel, shown overleaf, was a quick, simple and visual way to take the ambient emotional 'temperature', and gauge positive and negative energy distribution.

Metaphors help people to relate aspects of change to a more familiar, perhaps, homelier, and (hopefully!) less threatening way. A data cleaning and data migration exercise, for instance, might be thought of as similar to a garage or attic clear-out, with all (or most of) the messages from one context translated into the other – such as getting rid of unwanted junk, and making space to store new items.

Metaphors can be evocative of positive benefits. Metaphorical words or visual images can trigger positive associations, which encourage reframing. A metaphor should have enough similarities with the target

"I think the differences between the people and their perceptions of things are quite interesting. If you explore those you tend to find out the things that need to be fixed rather than focusing on the things that everyone agrees on."

Henley Forum change agent

change idea that people can easily relate the two, but enough different characteristics to stimulate new ideas.

Meaningful conversations go beyond superficial understanding. They generate a deeper insight into what a proposed change means for those involved. Meaningful conversations tend to draw on many differing points of view, yet their diverse perspectives are used in complementary ways to increase engagement and develop a collective commitment to a way forward.

The change agents involved highlighted three processes that they had found useful in facilitating meaningful conversations: respectful inquiry; written conversation in two voices; and Communities of Practice and online peer-to-peer conversations.

The essence of a respectful inquiry, according to Niels Van Quaquebeke and colleagues³ involves **questioning openly, asking respectfully, and listening attentively**. To aid the process, it is possible to prepare a list of respectful questions in advance of a conversation, which then become prompts to encourage reflection and critical thinking. This form of inquiry is called **Socratic questioning**.⁴

An **essay in two voices**⁵ is a simple-to-learn process, where two people start separately, and write 500 words on their view of a topic. Then, without talking, they exchange their writing, and read what their conversational partner wrote. They then each write a 250-word response, and again exchange their writing without speaking. The process is repeated, halving the number of words each time, until both parties produce a 140-character tweet that summarises their joint perspective.

Finally, the change agents who contributed to this research found that Communities of Practice – which are found in an increasing number of organisations – and online peer-to-peer conversations helped alter perspectives through the power of collective intelligence. They noticed that at times it could be helpful to step back, relax their drive to push acceptance of change, and allow conversations within peer group settings to transform negativity into engagement.

Understanding resistance to change

Who is resisting?

What are they resisting?

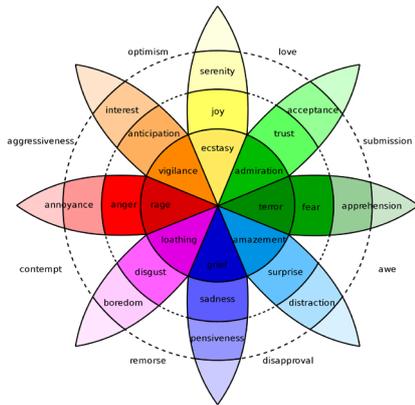
What evidence is there for that?

What are the benefits of resistance to them?

What are the disadvantages of resistance to them?

What are the underlying reasons for resistance?

When does resistance arise?
Where does it arise?



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA

Mapping emotions with Plutchik's wheel (Plutchik, 1991⁶)

The depth of colour on each petal represents the intensity of the emotion and hence its potency.

The space between the petals represents the interaction effect between the emotions on either side.

Some petals represent primary emotions that attract you towards the source of your reaction, others propel you away from it.

The wheel shows only some primary energies prompting motion; registering a few people's response on the universe of 34,000 different nuanced emotions requires a digital tool and a lot of data to produce the most meaningful analysis.

Work with emergent practice through agile sensemaking

Rather than formulating comprehensive roll-out plans that people can push back against, it is often more productive to create the spaces for more informed sensemaking, and then work with emergent practice to build on positive energy for motion.

Operating continuously, and interacting together, there are seven basic principles in operation when people come to make sense of change. People use them constantly to revise their perceptions and practices throughout the whole change process, but the influences on their sensemaking in each part of the organisation will be different. Inevitably, pockets of negativity will form – and change agents should work agilely and intelligently to manage these as they arise, rather than attempting to adhere to a 'master plan' created months ago, and which may already be out of date.

References

- (1) Empathy map videos can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaUwfAss3Tk and www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAdbbsZolOw
- (2) Watkins A. (2015). <https://youtu.be/h-rRgpPbR5w?t=8s>
- (3) Van Quaquebeke, N., & Felps, W. (2018). Respectful inquiry: a motivational account of leading through asking questions and listening. *Academy of Management Review*, 43(1), 5-27.
- (4) Guide to Socratic questioning can be found at www.criticalthinking.org/store/get_file.php?inventories_id=231&inventories_files_id=374
- (5) Blair, M. (2011). *Essay in Two Voices*, Jefferson MD, Pelerei, Inc
- (6) Plutchik, R. (1991). *The Emotions*, Lanham Maryland, University Press of America.
- (7) Weick, K. E. (2002). Real time Reflexivity: Prods to Reflection. *Organization Studies*, 23, 893 898.

Seven principles affecting how people make sense of change (Based on the work of K.E. Weick⁷)

1. Interpretation is a SOCIAL process. People get a sense of what change means to them from the conversations they have with others.
2. How a person construes their IDENTITY affects their response. Change can leave people uncertain of the value of their role. They may identify themselves as victims or resisters of change.
3. Careful reflection and review before action adds depth to understanding (RETROSPECTION). Without a clear explanation, people will act rashly on superficial interpretations simply to ease their puzzlement.
4. Pay attention to a wide variety of CUES when scoping the problem so that solutions incorporate all the major factors affecting success. People often use limited information to construct a story and then look for cues to confirm their interpretation.
5. Sensemaking is an ONGOING process; nothing is ever completely figured out. It is important to recognise how dynamic sensemaking is: people are constantly updating their interpretation based on different signals and cues.
6. Avoid accepting the first PLAUSIBLE explanation. Usually what is immediately plausible will produce overly simplistic and biased interpretations.
7. Complex change is best ENACTED through continuous experimentation testing and refining each step. To keep moving and be resilient requires thinking while doing, actively experimenting and then re-evaluating what next.

Henley Business School

Founded in 1945, by business for business. Henley's full-service portfolio extends from undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes to a world-renowned executive education offer, from cutting-edge research spanning a broad range of fields to specialist consultancy services. Henley develops leaders to make the right choices: right for themselves, right for their organisations and right for the wider community in which they exist.

Henley Forum for Organisational Learning and Knowledge Strategies

The Henley Forum for Organisational Learning and Knowledge Strategies, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence. As a membership-based community, it is a magnet for leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders from the knowledge, learning and OD communities. Our partners collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance that advances knowledge, learning and change practice in order to develop dynamic organisations.

To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Marina Hart +44 (0) 1491 418723.

For more information visit www.henley.ac.uk/henleyforum or email henleyforum@henley.ac.uk for an information pack.

Publishing services provided by Grist. www.gristonline.com