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BUSINESS ADVANCEMENT INC.®

The Harper Report:

Eight Steps To Overcoming Organizational Resistance

Major change is a double edged sword. Even when people know that it's necessary to do things differently because of new opportunities, mergers, acquisitions, reorganizations, crises, or alliances, resistance is commonplace. The biggest challenge of leading through resistance, however, can be recognizing its various disguises.

It's easy to recognize when resistance is overt and appears as hostile encounters with others, ignoring requests, or outright refusal to change. But even the savviest CEOs can miss signs of covert resistance. This is because everyone appears to have good intentions and it's often difficult to pinpoint exactly where the problems are coming from. For instance, employees may initially agree to take on new projects or adhere to new policies or procedures, but they're steadily busy with other priorities or consistently forget to do things differently. The bottom line is that progress stalls.

In this report, we present eight steps you can take to get progress back on track, regardless of the form that resistance takes.

1. Understand the source(s) of resistance. In order to determine the best way to address resistance after you recognize that it's occurring, you must find out where it's coming from and why it's happening. Unfortunately, there are at least as many reasons for resistance as there are reasons for change. Some of the most common issues we've observed in companies include: anger over real or perceived loss of power and control, discomfort with doing things

differently, resentment over increased workload, fear of job loss, and generalized anxiety about the unknown.

2. Identify a "grass roots" plan to engage others:

Winning over key leaders who can influence groups and sub-groups at every level of the organization is a great way to build trust relatively quickly. Keep in mind that while many leaders hold management positions, the most powerful leaders are actually those who hold social influence, regardless of their position in the organizational hierarchy. For example, in one company, the clerk who dispensed office supplies was a powerful social leader. The more leaders you can engage, the faster you can amplify their influence.

3. Be candid about the challenge and the path ahead:

Give people the facts about what they're facing and they'll respect your honesty, even if they are unhappy about the situation. Provide them with a path for moving through the change that they can buy into, and they will be more likely to cooperate. Example: at one company that was merging with a competitor, executives kept all employees informed about what was happening and what to expect during integration. The company also provided employees at every level with workshops on change management, and individual coaching on developing a resume and interviewing skills. The result? Most employees committed to staying productive on the job until the company closed its doors nine months later.

4. **Build confidence:** Provide examples of how your organization has overcome other difficult times and concrete evidence that supports the slow but incremental progress being made in the here and now. The more that people can see how their individual and group contributions are making a difference, the more in control they will feel and the more committed they will be to changes.

5. **Communicate frequently – and credibly:** In times of uncertainty, people crave information. And with information readily accessible on the Internet, if they don't get what they need from you, they'll get it from anyone or anything else that seems at all credible. This is how rumors, grapevines, and other misleading information are circulated. Even if you don't have complete information, people will be more inclined to trust you if they can perceive a connection between what you're telling them and what they can readily observe happening around them.

6. **Use appropriate communication channels:** There is no one best way to communicate with diverse groups and individuals. In the age of texting, Twitter, YouTube, etc. it's easy to believe that everyone communicates using the newest technology. However, we still meet people who don't have smart phones, who don't tweet or text each other, and prefer hard copy mail and magazines to email. The greater the variety of channels you use to

communicate (both high tech and low tech), the more likely it is that you'll successfully connect with your stakeholders.

7. **Admit mistakes:** One of the best ways to soften resistance is to acknowledge your own mistakes and what you're doing to correct them. Not only does this minimize the amount of time spent stuck on the conflict; it also opens the door for others to admit their own mistakes, and for both sides to find a new common ground.

8. **Monitor progress and adjust as necessary:** It's critical to set realistic milestones for progress that are in proportion to the degree of resistance you are experiencing. Are decisions getting made? Do you observe fewer conflicts? Are project milestones back on track? Use concrete evidence rather than opinion to determine whether progress is actually happening.

Remember, the more that resistance is entrenched in your organization, the longer it will take to make progress. Applying the above eight steps can significantly help you address resistance. However, if problems persist or if you need to accelerate progress, contact a consultant who is experienced at overcoming organizational resistance. Working in collaboration with an outside expert can help you gain fresh perspectives on stubborn issues and provide you with new approaches for breaking out of jams.



About the authors:

Pamela S. Harper is the Founding Partner and CEO of Business Advancement Inc. (BAI), based in Glen Rock, NJ. She is an internationally known business performance expert, author, and professional speaker with over 20 years experience in internal and external consulting to entrepreneurial, middle market, and Fortune 500 companies in a wide range of industries, all going through extraordinary growth and change. Pam is the author of the critically acclaimed book, *Preventing Strategic Gridlock®: Leading Over, Under & Around Organizational Jams to Achieve High Performance Results*. She has published and been quoted in prominent media outlets including: *BusinessWeek*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *Red Herring*, *Entrepreneur*, *Forbes.com* and major newspapers around the world.

D. Scott Harper, Ph.D. is Sr. Partner and COO of BAI. He is a globally recognized expert in innovation processes and systems with a unique ability to translate technical insights into desired business results, gained from over 20 years of leadership experience in Johnson & Johnson Consumer Company, Pfizer Consumer Healthcare, and Warner-Lambert Company.

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