Opposition to equality, diversity, and inclusion from the perspective of change resistance

*Equality, diversity, and inclusion initiatives require strategic management and calculated repositioning like any other major organisational change effort. Change can bring uncertainty, fear, and psychological distress among employees, leading to resistance that risks undermining change efforts. **Odessa Hamilton** overviews the change literature and writes that problematising all sources of resistance is a fundamental flaw in organisational change efforts. Validating resistance can legitimise the emotions of the resister, which can moderate their resistive efforts.*

Equality, diversity, and inclusion initiatives are not always given the attention they deserve, nor the gravitas they require. As such, they are not routinely approached in the same systematic and structured way as other forms of organisational change. Events of 2020 provoked a surge of organisational commitments toward purposeful, impactful change. Some were a retroactive, yet pragmatic, response to the coronavirus pandemic. Others manifested under the political pressure of equality, in a climate of exposed racial injustice. Change such as these require strategic management and calculated repositioning like any other major organisational reform.

With stakeholder interests in the spotlight, more and more organisations are adopting *the triple bottom line* framework ('people, planet, prosperity'), giving homage particularly to social priorities that are increasingly more recognised as key ethical investments. Still, the sad reality is that the equality, diversity, and inclusion agenda is not always eagerly embraced, and change, albeit well intentioned, has the potential to bring about with it resistance that can thwart all productive efforts. One must understand the dynamics involved in organisational change implementation, and the principles behind the effective governance of ensuing resistance, to bring about impactful, sustainable, and scalable change.

From stability to change

Organisational change, broadly, refers to a premeditated series of organisational-wide actions, driven by leaders, to alter key components of the organisation, such as its hierarchy, infrastructure, objectives, ethos, culture, processes, systems, procedures, or personnel, inclusive of mergers and acquisitions. Change can be performed in isolation, but more often than not, it takes a cyclic course; periodically shifting an organisation from stability to change over time. While change can be purposeful and preplanned, adapting to the times often means operating with urgency, under ambiguous conditions and aggressive timelines.

To elucidate the change process, Van de Ven and Poole (1995) developed a four-item taxonomy that comprised; planned change (*teleology*); regulatory change (*lifecycle*); conflict change (*dialectics*); and competitive change (*evolution*). This article primarily attends to the **teleological process** that, regrettably, often proves problematic because of an inability to make change entirely objective, coupled with a failed collective recognition of the need for change, which invariably generates resistance. It should be noted that incremental organisational change is a constant phenomenon that does not generate resistance in the same way, principally because such changes are not cognitively perceived (Mantere et al., 2012).

Why change

To some degree, organisations have been forced to prioritise their moral credentials, under the growing power and influence of social movements. From an evolutionary viewpoint, Charles Darwin stressed the importance of adapting to change for survival. The same is true for organisations. As organisations have to cope with accelerated macro and micro pressures, along with environmental complexities, change has become necessary for them to remain viable – that is to survive (Thomas & Hardy, 2011). Change has become synonymic with innovation, growth, and sustainability – a basic tenet for maintaining a competitive advantage, and with it, economic expansion. Change can be leveraged to attract the best talent, and it can develop into higher morale, increased retention, and stronger organisational commitment, (Klarner et al., 2011).

Fear of change

However, the void between stability and change represents a juxtaposed potential for either resistance or acceptance. Organisational change resistance is the attempt by employees to disrupt the change process and invert the power configuration. Therefore, resistance presents a platform for possible failed outcomes. Proverbially, resistance can be captured as '*the scales of justice*', which determines the success or failure of change efforts. Not only is the path to organisational change complex and nuanced, but employee attitudes weigh heavily on final outcomes (Deetz, 2008). Regrettably, change can cultivate uncertainty, fear, and even psychological distress among employees. This can lead to resistance that, whether deemed rational or senseless, has the potential to render change efforts futile.

Forces that incite resistance are many and multifaceted; they can include threats to power, resource reallocations, political agendas, antagonistic relationships, expertise endangerment, or even group and structural inertias. Many of these represent a perceived breach of psychological contract (Rousseau, 1998). However, resistance can equally derive from intrinsic postures, such as inter-individual predispositions to cope with change, or the time needed to transition emotionally through change (Varol & Varol, 2013). Any one of these conditions can elevate sentiments of uncertainty, threat, grief, vexation, and intolerance that may ultimately lead to resistance.

Evolution of resistance

Lewin (1951) characterised organisational change resistance as a systems concept that affects employers and employees alike. Conceptualisations of change resistance later evolved toward the pathological and the behavioural; human reactions that required systematic and structured management. Since indices of fear are often a common denominator in and motivator of resistance, resistance was subsequently treated as a psychological concept (Griffin, 1993). This position was a relatively stagnant one for circa 30 years prior to the new millennium (Thomas & Hardy, 2011). However, of more recent, nuanced perspectives have emerged. Organisational change resistance has been constructed as an entry point to negotiation, and a platform for gainful discourse and constructive criticism (Courpasson et al., 2012). Ultimately, how one views organisational change resistance will ultimately shape the prescription for overcoming it, and yet contemporary methods that use behavioural science have been found to advance change more seamlessly than traditional methods.

Creative resistance

Resisters are renowned for their creativity in asserting control over the change process, particularly as it pertains to issues of equality, diversity, and inclusion. Resistance can reveal itself as glaringly overt expressions or behaviours, but when political correctness and a fear of reproach or punishment exert more influence over a resister's actions, resistance can become more subtle, underhanded and in many ways more insidious. Private exchanges between colleagues can undermine change efforts, but resistance can also be enacted through withdrawal or disengagement. Although not an exhaustive list, engineered grievances; absenteeism; presenteeism; resignation; intentional mediocrity; belligerence; non-compliance; bullying; sabotage; theft and obstruction can all be seen as forms of '*owned resistance*', which can destabilise meaningful and advantageous reforms (e.g., Courpasson et al., 2012; Deetz, 2008; Prasad & Prasad, 2000).

Avoiding stalemate

Scepticism around resistance can deter the willingness of leaders to proceed with change strategies, something that may invariably impede the effectiveness of change implementation (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999). This can be especially true when the change being put forward is seen as political. Contemporary theorists reject the "*self-defeated vision of resistance*", that is, the irrevocable opposition between irreconcilable adversaries. The alternative view shapes resistance as an authentic form of constructive opposition, that can engender a spirit of compromise and common interest. It can also present a space for information dissemination and exchange, where resisters can be appropriately heard, and leaders can justify and share their vision for change (Thomas & Hardy, 2011). This strategy falls under the remit of '*productive resistance*', where the interests of resisters are voiced, either anonymously or in an open forum, through internal or external channels, to foster arrangements that benefit the organisation. A process that, at its core, encourages collective problem-solving (Courpasson et al., 2012; Knights & McCabe, 2000).

Change the narrative

Many of the issues around managing occupational change resistance are attributed to its characterisation; that is, whether it is to be considered constructive, destructive, or somewhere in between. This can be especially challenging when the change being proposed triggers a polarisation in responses, which is quite typical in the equality, diversity, and inclusion space. In many ways leaders have full prerogative over what responses are deemed resistive or not. Leaders control the narrative. Yet, they often label resistive behaviours in a way that is self-serving. They can, therefore, become victim to their own bias and dysfunctional response (Courpasson et al., 2012). Resisters are commonly thought of as adversaries, who need to be contained or muted to preserve the sanctity of the change process. Moreover, leaders tend to lean toward narratives that perpetuate the status quo in the power distribution (Thomas & Hardy, 2011). This can become self-fulfilling, insofar as the behaviours of the resisters are fitted to the erroneous interpretations that a leader may hold, rending the change process illegitimate (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). This highlights the need to evaluate the way that leaders contribute to the behaviours that they later label resistant.

Problematising all sources of resistance is a fundamental flaw in organisational change efforts. Resistance can be a natural response to change, particularly when the change proposed is seen as personally harmful. Various scholars believe that resistance in the organisational change process is fated (e.g., Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Griffin, 1993*). It should be acknowledged that resistance can be justifiable, even in discourse apropos equality, diversity, and inclusion. This, of course, undermines the popular notion that resistance is baseless, or worse, bigotry. When leaders shape the narrative of resistance as exclusively bad or contentious, they miss the opportunity to leverage resistance toward the ultimate intent of substantial change. In addition, ignoring resistance or labelling it defiant only serves to antagonise resisters. This in turn may increase the magnitude of resistive efforts or facilitate a morphing of resistive responses into more insidious tactics that are harder to manage. However, when leaders accept that resistance can advance the change process, it still favours them. Validating resistance can legitimise the emotions of the resister, which can moderate their resistive efforts. When narratives around resistance are positive, a safe platform for processual contributions becomes available, with less fear of leader retaliation or dissent (Prasad & Prasad, 2000).

Square the circle

A number of techniques have been identified to guide leaders through resistive periods of change. Namely, communication, clarification, education, and encouragement. Where best practice for employer-employee alliances involve participation, facilitation, and negotiation, and despite the negative connotations, to a limited degree manipulation and coercion (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). When employees experience conduct that is fair and collaborative, they tend to feel empowered and produce behaviours requisite for successful change. This type of '*thoughtful resistance*' contributes to the scalability and sustainability of organisational change (e.g., Courpasson et al., 2012; Mantere et al., 2012).

Change readiness

Justifying change of an equality, diversity and inclusion persuasion can be uniquely challenging, as it requires more than compliance to be truly effective. Unlike systems or structural change, it requires an organisational-wide commitment, at the individual level, to adopt egalitarian values. Change readiness is influenced by the shared cognitive belief that the change proposed is necessary. This will give creditability to the process and generate an impetus among resisters to embrace the change. Granted, this may require some convincing with demonstrable metrics. It must be believed that the change will produce universally positive outcomes, that can be achieved efficiently (Rafferty et al., 2013). However, the status quo will always seem more legitimate because whatever the scenario, change causes uncertainty, be it actual or perceived.

Efforts to govern all sources of resistance to organisational change are futile. Further, leaders are misguided in the belief that a single prescription for change or a single style of management will be both situationally relevant and universally effective in reducing resistance. This is true also across time – a change strategy cannot be eternally recycled within the same company. Macro and microenvironments alter over time, making each occupational change process unique. Leaders must accept the inevitability of change resistance, and shape narratives to support an open dialogue. Ultimately, the sensitive management of resistance and giving the process the solemnity it warrants, can render change efforts as successful as they are sustainable.

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Notes:

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