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Effectively Managing Internal Resistance to Change in the Workplace

By Robert Gorin

Every organization has to deal with those who are resistant to change. We refer to these people as the “Change-Prevention Committee” and, rest assured, they will prevent your business from moving forward unless you can effectively convince them why change is good for both them and your organization.

The way an organization handles change is critical to its success, particularly during periods of uncertainty. In the year 500 B.C., the Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed that life was in flux, with everything constantly on the verge of becoming something else. He noted that resisting this natural flow was a hindrance to progress and growth in all aspects of life.

Resistance, however, has proven to be a very normal human response to change over the centuries and in organizations today, often manifests itself in the form of the formidable Change-Prevention Committee.

What Is the Change-Prevention Committee?

Every organization has a Change Prevention Committee (CPC). This group of individuals ranges from C-suite execs and middle managers to factory workers. They are all



so resistant to change that, collectively, they actually begin to stagnate corporate growth. And beware! The CPC can show up at any time as disparate or unified forces of resistance that form unexpectedly to thwart the implementation of projects, both big and small. It is important to understand that people within an organization may or may not actually realize that they are members of the CPC. After all, it's part of human nature to resist change now and then. So, while they should not be blamed for their participation, their resistance must be successfully managed to enable organizations, both large and small, to achieve change in order to remain competitive market participants. In order to effectively navigate this block, it is essential to understand why people resist change in the first place.

While humans can and do adapt to change all the time, it can be a difficult and sometimes painful process.

Why Do People Resist Change?

Even if a new project offers an amazing solution to a currently flawed system or other problems that your organization is facing, you should expect resistance. Why? Because no matter where in the world they reside or work, people have a tendency to get comfortable with the status quo; even if the status quo, itself, is uncomfortable. It follows that when the prospect of change and associated

uncertainty are on the horizon, this can churn up higher levels of anxiety. This is precisely when the CPC is most likely to start working overtime to ensure that everything stays exactly as it is.

Wide ranging research — some of which was highlighted a while back in a highly relevant PWC Strategy+Business article entitled, The Neuroscience of Leadership — has shown that in the human brain, resistance manifests as both a psychological and physiological reaction. Embracing change requires us to think and behave differently in a way that requires more brain power. When faced with the challenge of doing something differently, the initial physiological reaction is to keep everything in stasis — that is, to revert back to that with which the brain is already familiar. While humans can and do adapt to change all

the time, it can be a difficult and sometimes painful process.

This means you can expect resistance to most any change you plan to institute within your organization. Even the smallest ones, such as modifying work methods, updating routine office procedures, moving the physical location of an office or desk, revising job titles, even changing regularly scheduled meeting times, etc. None of these are particularly impactful on their own, but cumulatively, they can account for great leaps and strides in moving your business forward.

If it's hard to initiate these types of small changes, imagine just how hard it might be to address resistance when instituting the types of seismic technology shifts that cause widespread disruption across entire

infrastructures. The good news is that once you understand the reasons why members of your team are resistant to change, you are empowered to take the right steps to prepare for a successful transition.

How to Identify Members of the CPC

Because the reasons for joining the Change-Prevention Committee are vast and varied, it's critical to learn how to identify its members. When it comes to a big shift, such as implementing new software, you're likely to find resisters in many different forms.

Some members of the CPC might be easier to spot than others. You may hear them complaining about a new boss or loudly defending their right to do things a certain way, simply because that's what they already

Common reasons why CPC members typically feel so resistant to doing things differently

1) Fear

The primary cause of resistance to change is fear of the unknown. Uncertainties regarding new ways of working, new roles and responsibilities, new things to learn, and potential failure can result in a lot of fear and confusion. This makes the CPC reluctant to embark on a new journey.

2) Past Experience

Members of the CPC might have experienced prior changes at your organization, or in other jobs, that were not well managed and left them very wary of future change. Whether the poor handling of those events in the past was due to ineffective communication, inconsistent leadership or something else, it may have left CPC members suspicious of future changes that come their way.

3) Nostalgia

The "changing of the old guard" doesn't automatically mean that a change in culture will follow. If new management shows up, you are sure to find people with ties to the old culture actively joining the CPC.

4) Lack of Preparation

When change is announced without warning, it doesn't give people enough time to see the value in new ways of doing things. People need time to embrace change and adapt to it. Lack of preparation will only increase resistance.

5) Coercion

If people feel any sense of being coerced into change, they are likely to strongly resist. If the actions and attitudes of leadership feel unfair and unjustified, or are not handled with care and respect, the expectation should be that people will not respond well.

6) Sense of Exclusion

The mere idea of change can elicit a fear of being unseated and excluded. People may join the CPC because they feel at risk of losing, or have already lost, a sense of competence and importance they previously had enjoyed within your company. The emotional burden of loss and alienation can overshadow any logical thinking about change.

7) Self-Doubt

It is common for employees to wonder if they have the ability or capacity to adapt to the new changes you are implementing. Their doubts about their own knowledge and skills, and their ability to learn new ones, can stir up strong resistance to change.

8) Peer Pressure

Peer pressure can be another reason people exhibit resistance to change. If "everyone else" is resisting change, shouldn't they just go along? If their manager doesn't want the change, perhaps they should simply agree rather than push back. Peer pressure exerts a very strong force on most people, and therefore has the potential to limit receptivity to change and dramatically inhibit progress.



know and understand. Constituents may be found bonding over their shared skepticism and sarcasm. They will often highlight ways that new processes, workflows, technologies, etc., have failed, or at least the ways they perceive these have failed them.

Other CPC members may be more difficult to identify. They might exhibit more passive-aggressive behavior, such as forgetting to show up at meetings scheduled to discuss the new changes, failing to respond to emails, not participating in company town hall gatherings, etc., all while rigidly adhering to a 40-hour work schedule no matter what may be required of them. Regardless of how members reveal themselves, the CPC roster is dynamic and constantly changing. As a result, pinpointing active members is itself an ongoing process that requires attention and dedication to successfully implement change.



Getting CPC Members to Give Up Their "Badges"

It takes a lot of finesse and relational skills to get employees through the different levels of resistance to change. This is where true leaders earn their keep. Strong leadership is essential for disbanding the Change-Prevention Committee, as is providing a clear, concise and meaningful problem statement and scope of the change. Different tactics for accomplishing this include:

- Giving people plenty of notice about and transparently explaining the upcoming change
- Encouraging people to consider what change means for the organization as a whole rather than focusing only on what it will mean for them
- Finding ways to get people excited about what change will bring
- Creating an understanding of what will happen if there is no change
- Spotlighting problems with how the current system directly affects people
- Alleviating fear by replacing coercion with encouragement and support
- Providing clarity around the various steps in the change process to minimize uncertainty



Encouraging people to consider what change means for the organization as a whole and finding ways to get people excited about what change will bring.

- Staging one-on-ones and small group meetings to gain more insight into resistance

Along with these tactics, it's good to have an overall strategy for overcoming resistance. As part of this, it can be very effective to bring resisters into the change process, so they can see firsthand that there is actually a real problem which requires change.

To alleviate worries or fears that those within the organization might have, it is also helpful to highlight the fact that you want them to be instrumental in creating a beneficial solution, and that clinging to old systems and ideologies will inhibit that. Remain focused on the fact that you are seeking to improve the status quo, and invite CPC members to offer and discuss their potential suggestions toward that end. Engaging and involving CPC members throughout the process, helps to build their emotional and psychological investment.

As change pulls people away from their comfort zones, the transformation initiative must have the proper structure and executive support. Make sure the project's governance and success measurements are expressed clearly, early and often. Next, link the incentive program to the desired change efforts and outcome. Keep in mind that what gets measured gets done. Explain the metrics, measure them often, and openly report on progress. As the process advances, be sure to celebrate both big and small successes along the way.

Experience has shown that regardless of your best efforts, some people will find it too

difficult to embrace the change you propose. Ultimately, the company will be forced to move on without them. In the end, most Change-Prevention Committee members are not going to give up their membership badges without a fight. But with effective leadership and management of change, even many of the staunchest members can be persuaded to see the benefits of staying agile in a business landscape that is constantly in flux.

As one of the oldest and most respected names in middle-market corporate turnaround and restructuring, Our team at Getzler Henrich expertly delivers management and financial consulting solutions to solve the distinct challenges and needs of today's businesses. If you are currently facing resistance to change within your organization or are looking to implement transformative efforts that are likely to be met with resistance, we encourage you to reach out to us for a conversation. We are here to help.



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