

Management Insights

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Dealing with Resistance

By Babak Armajani

Embrace it. It's a vital ingredient in change

The phone has been ringing off the hook in our office these past few weeks.

Governors, mayors, city managers, legislators and county officials are calling to explore options for managing the fiscal crisis. Everyone wants to avoid tax increases, service cuts or both. Yet these conversations, whether with Republicans, Democrats or nonpartisans, have another uncanny similarity. Callers know that there are ways to change how money is spent so that citizens get better results with the limited revenues available. But, they are perplexed, almost to the point of paralysis, about how to deal with the inevitable resistance to the changes they would like to make.



The recent focus of my Management Insights columns (see [A Formula for Leadership](#) and [A Push-Pull Strategy for Change](#)) has been on a kind of formula for change, developed by the Center for Creative Leadership, which smart leaders work in order to get changes made. The *demand for change*, times *a vision for a better future*, times *knowledge of the next steps*, times *belief that change can happen* must be greater than the resistance. Because of the urgency of the fiscal crisis, I am jumping over knowledge and belief, for the moment, and using this week's column to address the concept of resistance.

D (demand) x V (vision) x K (knowledge of next steps) x B (belief) > R (resistance)

Resistance Is a Vital Necessity

The strategy that my colleagues and I see working over and over again is not to try to overcome the resistance, but rather to embrace it.

Why? Because resistance is, in fact, a vital ingredient in change. Especially in achieving transformational change, which is just the kind of change we need to deal effectively with the fiscal crisis.

Consider your personal workout routine. The hills you climb on your bike, or the weights on the machines at the gym, give you the resistance you *need* for physical vitality. Slaves must have worked terribly hard building the pyramids, but it also took some exceptionally inventive engineering genius to overcome the resistance of gravity. The innovation of the elevator was driven in part by people's resistance to climbing stairs.

So, too, the fiscal crisis offers a great opportunity for innovation. I suppose there are a few folks who believe there is nothing we can change about how we deliver public services. Many more of the executives and elected officials I speak with, however, can rattle off a list of changes they would like to make if only they could "wave a magic wand."

Yet when options to cutting services or raising taxes are explored, they fear upsetting expected resistors. In short, we would all like to bring about dramatic change without having to change anything (or make anyone uncomfortable).

A nutritionist would hardly be doing his job advising a diabetic if he said, "You can continue with your diet as you always have." Similarly, we have to be direct with people who call us, by leveling with them about the resistance they will experience in bringing about real fiscal change.

This is where *embracing the resistance* comes in. Resistance is there to teach us the things we need to know in order to make the transformation happen. By embracing the resistance, we open ourselves to the learning we need to make breakthroughs.

Tactics for Dealing with Resistance

Here are some specific practical ways you can "embrace" resistance to changes you want to make:

Talk to your resistors. Don't try to convince them of anything. Learn from them about the true source of their resistance. Embracing resistance does not mean giving in. Hardly. But one can't work through resistance without a thorough understanding of its source. Hint: It's almost always rooted in fear. How could you reduce fear?

Give people choices. Stephen Goldsmith, who moderates Management Insights, made dramatic changes during his tenure as mayor of Indianapolis. He wanted to introduce competition into the provision of city services. Understandably, he faced stiff resistance from city bureaucracies, unions and other powerful interests. Goldsmith learned from the resistance that some choices might make his initiative more palatable. He offered city bureaucracies the opportunity to compete against private

sector bidders, and he offered gain-sharing bonuses to city employees who found ways to cut costs while maintaining good services.

Invest in change. Think about Detroit, which has resisted change and continued to make cars for the 20th century. If the automakers are to survive, they not only need to change their mental paradigm, but they need to invest in redesigning their product and retooling their factories to make smaller, more fuel-efficient cars. Local governments also must make substantial investments — even in the face of huge fiscal shortfalls — in order to be able to deliver better results at less cost. The resistance can teach you where to invest. For instance, when I was with the Minnesota Department of Revenue, we used to think there was a single explanation for why people resisted paying their taxes on time. So we continually sought to make expensive investments in auditing and enforcement activities. When we embraced and learned from this resistance, we found that many taxpayers were "delinquent" simply because they did not understand how to comply. By moving some of our enforcement resources into educational activities, we were able to substantially raise the overall compliance rate.

Celebrate the resistance you experience. It's actually a gift!

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