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## Managing employee resistance to organizational change

# La gestion de la résistance des salariés face au changement organisationnel

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#### Abstract

Today, only human activity really creates value. What differentiates a high-performance company from a low-performance one is its people, their enthusiasm and their creativity. Human resources are undoubtedly the key resources of an organization, both the easiest and the most difficult to manage (Rguibi & Atid, 2021).

The arrival of a change within a company generates the appearance of transformations not only at the corporate level, but also at the level of employee behavior. These changes are sometimes welcomed, and sometimes not.

This can lead to different profiles of people with different characteristics reacting differently to change.

For some people who love novelty and excitement, change is seen as an opportunity to learn new things and also as a remedy against boredom and gloom, while others see it as a threat to the stability and longevity of their business.

As a result, when reorganizing work, it's important not to wait for resistance to change to manifest itself. You need to anticipate them in order to reduce them and provide appropriate support for the change. Even before a change takes place, it is essential to master all the factors that could lead to its rejection, to ensure a smooth and efficient transition.

With this in mind, the aim of this article is to focus on the issue of employee resistance to organizational change, since periods of change are difficult to manage because they entail a loss of reference points, which can lead to fear among employees due to a sense of loss of habits, routines, stability and the known order, resulting in uncertainty and discomfort that can translate into passive opposition or even active resistance.

Hence the importance of transforming potential obstacles into opportunities, while helping employees to adapt positively and effectively to organizational change.

**Keywords:** Change; external factors; internal factors, forms of resistance; manifestations

#### Résumé

Aujourd'hui, seule l'activité humaine est réellement créatrice de valeur. Ce qui différencie l'entreprise performante de l'entreprise non performante se sont les hommes, leur enthousiasme, et leur créativité. Les ressources humaines sont sans aucun doute les ressources clés d'une organisation, les plus faciles et les plus difficiles à gérer (Rguibi & Atid, 2021).

L'arrivée d'un changement au sein de l'entreprise génère l'apparition des transformations non seulement au niveau de l'entreprise, mais aussi aux niveaux des comportements des employés. Ces changements sont parfois bien accueillis et parfois non.

On peut se retrouver donc face aux différents profils de personnes dont les caractéristiques conduiront à une réaction différente face au changement.

Pour certains individus qui aiment la nouveauté et l'excitation, le changement est considéré comme une opportunité pour apprendre de nouvelles choses et aussi comme un remède contre l'ennui et la morosité, d'autres y voient comme une menace pour la stabilité et la longévité de leur activité.

De ce fait, lors d'une réorganisation du travail, il ne faut pas attendre que les résistances au changement se manifestent. Il faut les anticiper afin de les réduire et de prévoir un accompagnement au changement adapté. Avant même l'apparition d'un changement, il est primordial de maîtriser tous les facteurs pouvant conduire à son rejet afin d'assurer une transition harmonieuse et efficace.

Dans cet ordre d'idées, notre présente article à pour objectif de mettre l'accent sur la question de la résistance des employés face au changement organisationnel car ces périodes de changement sont difficiles à gérer du fait que celles—ci entrainent une perte de repères ce qui peut engendrer chez les salariés une peur due à un sentiment de perte des habitudes, routines, stabilité et l'ordre connu qui entraine chez ces derniers de l'incertitude et de l'inconfort pouvant se traduire par un comportement d'opposition passive, voire de résistance active.

D'où l'intérêt de transformer les obstacles potentiels en opportunités, tout en aidant les employés à s'adapter positivement et efficacement aux changements organisationnels.

Mots clés : Changement ; facteurs externes ; facteurs internes ; formes de résistance ; manifestations

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## Introduction

Faced with globalization and the rise of competition, companies must to constantly improve their practices. These changes require the introduction of new technologies and the optimization of existing work methods by implementing the necessary actions necessary to reduce non-productivity.

A change project represents an important investment for a company and its failure is very fraught with consequences. Today, a large majority of these projects encounters difficulties due to the fact that they focus on purely technical aspects leaving aside the social and human dimensions. These failures encountered are related to a insufficient analysis of the needs and an underestimation of the support to the change. In this sense, changing or disappearing then becomes an important issue at the level management. Change is often perceived as a source of difficulty if it is poorly accompanied and manifests itself in resistance to change, a factor in the decline of the competitivity. The individual facing a new situation, which he has not chosen, cannot understand the change and in this case his adhesion is then compromised. There understanding of the motivation of individuals to resist change then becomes necessary to ensure effective change.

The effects of resistance to change can be multiple and can lead organizations to destruction without being able to rebuild themselves, possibly causing them to go backwards. Resistance can therefore be the cause of the mid-success or failure of change. In addition to these dimensions linked to the change itself, resistance can reduce. In addition to these dimensions related to the change itself, resistance can decrease productivity and even efficiency at work, it can also lead to an increase in turnover and make the work climate more sensitive by bringing out inter personnel. In short, the consequences of resistance to change can be disastrous at both the human and organizational levels, jeopardizing the success of the success of the change.

To lead the change, the manager is sometimes disarmed. This one often relies on methodological aspects rather than considering and acting on the purely human factor. The latter therefore plays an important role in the management of change to promote the appropriation of this one by the collaborators as well on the collective as well as individual level.

In this study, our objective is to determine the criteria for evaluating the resistance of individuals. This research presents, several issues:

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- Practical issues to help managers better manage the human aspects during transformation projects through practical tools for better management of the resistance of individuals resistance of individuals to change;
- Theoretical issues because research in management sciences aims to contribute to the enrichment of the socio-economic analysis of management in relation to the object of our research, which is the management of change through a better management of the resistance of actors with the help of a means of measurement.

Which leads us to pose the following problem: How to better manage individuals in situations of 7change? How to encourage behaviors support (or even sophisticated behaviors or conformists) to change while trying to understand resistance behaviors (limited or rebellious behaviors) or prevent them?

This article is divided into two axes: in the first part, we plan to present an overview on organizational change. First of all, we will start by defining organizational change, then focus on the triggering factors of organizational change and then present the challenges of change management. These points will lead us, in a second part, to address the core question of our research, while starting by defining resistance to change, then questioning the sources as well as the forms of the latter before providing answers and individualized solutions to overcome resistance to change.

## 1. Overview of Change management

## 1.1. Definition

Change Management means to plan, initiate, realize, control, and stabilize the change process on both the corporate and the personal level by handling obstacles carefully (Singh, et al., 2012). Change management has also been defined as the effective management of a business change such that executive leaders, managers and frontline employers work in concert to successfully implement the needed process, technology or organizational changes (Korir, et al., 2012). Change management is a planned loom for the transition of individuals, groups and organizations from existing state to a required future state. Thus, managing a change process is as important as change itself (Olajide, 2014).

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## 1.2. Factors influencing organizational change

Due to complexity of events and rapidity of technologies in the environment, organizations are subject to many pressures for change. Continuous developments and range of triggers force organizations towards change initiatives. Indeed, these pressures on organizations to change emanate from external and internal environment of the organizations. (Yilmaz & Kilicoglu, 2013). The external sources could be as a result of improved technology, pressure from interest groups from outside the organization such as government or competitors in the industry.

The internal source of change could be from individual such as shareholders, management, employees. Globalization, new technologies, culture shifts are some of the factors contributing to the fast-moving environment where organizations develop their activities. As a consequence, organizations have to change more frequently in response to the environment. Irrespective of the source, whenever the need for change is obvious, the management is always faced with the question of how to respond to this change. The dilemma is usually whether to change the objectives and strategies of the organization, or the technology, or human resource, or the organization structure, or the business environment (Olajide, 2014)

## 1.2.1 External factors

- The evolution of the competition:

The world is witnessing the opening of the economy of several countries. This openness reflects the considerable expansion of the economic space and the progress of the means of communication.

The evolution of the competition manifests itself in the increase of quality and also, in the decrease of costs and interventions, in everything that contributes to the brand image of the company.

To do so, the company is obliged to resort to more reliable and sophisticated manufacturing techniques, the improvement of skills by increasing staff training, and subsequently, the modification of work organization.

- The technological evolution

Technology is changing at an accelerated pace. It affects all levels of the organization and is becoming more and more sophisticated. However, the use of a more sophisticated always presupposes a change in the nature of the work, it also requires a qualified personnel able to master this technology.

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Technological evolution has also affected information systems. This is another one aspect of change that characterizes today's organizations. The technologies of information and communication technologies have an impact on the way organizations operate, on the way managers and employees do their jobs, and even on the the way companies develop their strategies.

- The evolution of the socio-political environment

Observed as a unit of production, the enterprise must satisfy the economic needs of the company, expressed by the market. As a workplace, it must meet the aspirations of its employees and observed as a citizen, it must demonstrate its good social and societal behavior. The nature of the relationship between the company and its socio-political environment which encompasses the state, donors, customers, suppliers, consumers, shareholders, pressure groups (group of consumer, chamber of commerce, etc.) is determined by the political system. They values, social norms determine the management practices that the company can use or those that are forbidden to him. These factors are also evolving by permanently modifying the spirit of innovation and the company's structures.

Thus, we can confirm that the evolution of the characteristics of the environment sociopolitics of a society has a considerable influence on the conduct of its affairs. The company is therefore inseparable from its socio-political environment.

## 1.2.2 Internal factors

Organizational change can also be determined by internal factors. These generally have the purpose of developing the company through the realization of important changes at the level of the structure, the culture, system and strategy. The main internal causes of change organizational are: the development of the company and the vision of the leader.

- The development of the company and its growth usually cause changes deep. Increasing the company's activity can create major problems that can be effectively solved by multiplying existing means.
- The vision of the leader is one of the main causes of change in companies.

The vision of the leader is one of the main causes of change in companies. Since the new leader often brings a fresh look, independent of the constraints inherited from the past he wants to change the existing situation in order to strengthen his company by transforming the existing situation in order to strengthen his company through the transformation of the

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competitive game in his favor. He believes that it is necessary to launch new products must be launched, quality improved, new skills acquired or certain activities.

## 1.3. The challenges of change management

Before asking the question of the stakes of change management in companies, it is important to understand why companies evolve.

In effect, changes are necessary in the life of a structure, and this, notably for the following reasons:

- Increase business and sales;
- Staying competitive with the competition;
- Implement a more interesting strategy given the current economic climate;
- Meet new standards;
- Respond to digital developments.

The economic stakes of the change allow the company to get the teams to adhere to the teams to the transformation project and to reduce the period of lower productivity.

As for the sociological stakes, these can be a means to reach an ideal chosen by a group of individuals chosen by a group of individuals requiring then a negotiation or a conflict. The change is also a tool that can serve or enslave a group

Concerning the psychological stakes, when a change takes place, it is accompanied by a process of mourning for the individuals concerned, it is accompanied by a process of mourning for previous situations.

## 2. Resistance to change

## 2.1. Definition

The notion of resistance to change is credited to Kurt Lewin who discussed it first in 1940's. His early work focused on the aspects of individual behavior that must be addressed in order to bring about effective organizational change (Kurt ,1945).

Resistance is the resultant employee's reaction of opposition to organizational change (Keen, 1981; Folger & Skarlicki ,1999). It has been studied as a prime reason why most change does not succeed or get implemented (Egan & Fjermestad, 2005).

For his part (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977) argue that resistance is "any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo". Status quo refers, according to the American Heritage Dictionary of idioms, as "the existing order of things, present customs, practices and power relations".

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In an organizational setting resistance is defined by (Block ,1989) as an expression of reservation which normally arises as a response or reaction to change.

## 2.2. Sources of resistance

## 2.2.1 Self-interest or concern over personal loss

The basic idea is that people focus more on their own interests than in those of the organization. People can have the belief that they will be negatively affected by the change. They might consider that they can lose something they value as a consequence of the change process, neglecting the possible benefits that change can provoke for the whole organization. This resistant behavior stems from the consequences on employee's established relationship with the organization or the perception of his role or place in the organization (Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009). The most common concerns in this category are:

- loss of power
- loss of prestige
- loss of salary
- change in working conditions
- loss of comfort

## 2.2.2 Group Resistance

Resistance not only manifests at an individual level but also related to groups and teams. Groups establish norms of behavior and performance that are communicated to members. This communication establishes the boundaries of expected behaviors. Failure to comply with such norms usually results in sanctions against group members by the group. If leaders initiate changes that are viewed as threatening to the staffs" norms, they are likely to meet with resistance. The more cohesive the staff is, the greater their resistance to change will be. (Lunenburg 2010).

Since groups and teams have more power than individuals alone it is relevant that leaders acknowledge these issues to avoid unexpected events such as strikes or lack of cooperation.

## 2.2.3 Misunderstandings

Employees' resistance to change can arise because they do not fully understand the change and its implications. If they do not understand the need for change or interpret in a different way the initiative resistance is likely to occur.

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An example of misunderstanding is offered by (Kotter & Schlesinger,1979) which illustrates the importance of clarifying things so that they do not lead to different interpretations; therefore highlighting the important role that communication plays in resistance to change.

In that case the president of a company decided to implement flexible working schedules for his employees in order to ease working conditions. Beforehand, the measure is meant to be beneficial for employees since with this system they have more freedom to choose when they want to work making easier to balance family life and work life.

The president was surprised when he knew that employees did not agree with the initiative. In fact, they had talked to the local union about the change and after that handed in a nonnegotiable proposal to turn down the initiative.

The underlying problem was that none of the employees really knew what the term flexible working hours meant. The meaning attributed by the employees was that they could be asked to work whenever the supervisors wanted to. Therefore they thought that they would have to work also in the evenings and week-ends if it was demanded by their superiors.

## 2.2.4 Low tolerance for change

Low tolerance for change might be a matter of individuals" personality. Some people show more preference for values related to stability and security therefore they will be more prone to develop resistant behaviors when facing situations that challenge their values. Moreover, uncertainty and fear of the unknown also make people prefer the actual situation which is certain that something unsure.

Another explanation for a low tolerance is the feelings that people hold about themselves. People with low self-confidence, poor self-esteem and low sense of self-efficacy may feel unable to engage in the change.

## 2.3 Managing and Overcoming Resistance to Change

Resistance to change can have very different causes and modes of expression depending on each one, hence the importance of providing individualized answers and solutions.

In particular, it will be strategic to anticipate the resistances upstream, as well as any possible obstacles that could hinder the transformation project.

In this part, there will be an explanation about possible ways how to manage and overcome resistance to change.

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## 2.3.1 Managing and Overcoming Resistance to Change on Individual Level

In this area, possible ways to manage individuals' resistance will be described more in detail. The reasons why resistance arises are taken up, and important aspects are described in the following.

## - Information

Information about change, available for those confronted with it, is of high importance (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). If individuals get insufficient or vague information about the planned change, it can lead to resistance to change (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1999). Research has shown that providing information about change reduces resistance to change. (Miller et al., 1994; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). The first information about planned change can be told to those who are affected in one-to-one discussions or within the whole group. Defining an appropriate information program requires much effort, significantly when many individuals are affected. (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). This information needs to be processed appropriately for those confronted with change because the amount and quality of data make a difference. When individuals receive informative and useful information about organizational change, it will lead to increased cooperation.

## - Orientation and Guidance

(Kotter ,1996) insists that successful change needs to have a direction. Resistance can arise if there is no clear vision for change which increases confusion in individuals. (Philippeit ,2009) also implies that orientation and stability need to be provided in change. This can be achieved by ensuring a good balance between change and stability, which means bringing necessary activities to implement change and day-to-day business tasks into balance. Moreover, set goals and fixated framework conditions give guidance and orientation. Creating an appropriate vision makes sensemaking possible, as individuals understand change better (Oreg, 2006).

## - Communication

In organizations, resistance to change can arise if no clear and effective communication exists (Kotter & Schlesinger,1979; 2008). Communication is a critical factor for implementing change and can effectively reduce resistance to change (Bordia et al., 2004). Moreover, communication is often used by individuals who verbally express resistance through complaints, counterarguments, or criticism against change (Doppler & Lauterburg, 2014; Giangreco & Peccei,2005).(Garman,2010) has found that the level and quality of communication can influence resistance to change. Efficient communication should guarantee

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that all people in the organization collaborate, exchange their knowledge, get information, and are motivated (Deresky, 2010). With good communication, the prevention of false expectations can be realized. Therefore, (Garman ,2010) implies that communication should be ample and clear.

## - Participation and Involvement

Evidence shows that if employees are not getting involved in change, they can react with resistance (Schweiger et al., 2018; Giangreco & Peccei, 2005). Participation in change processes can decrease resistance to change, as several studies have shown (Lok et al., 2005; Amiot et al., 2006). Several studies have shown that involving people in the first steps of implementing change can be advantageous as each individual has the feeling that his/her opinion is respected and needed (Lawrence, 1954). Participation and involvement as a facilitator for change are also mentioned in the paper of (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008).

## - Negotiation and Agreement

(Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008) state that negotiation helps to reduce resistance. Thus, (Schweiger et al.,2018) support this notion that negotiating reduces employees' resistance to change. The researcher states that with direct conversations they can speak out their needs and compromises regarding the implementation of change. It needs to be said that it can also encourage individuals to negotiate too much in their interest, and it can be time-consuming. There can exist different interests of managers and employees, and it can be possible that some people are trying to achieve their own personal needs.

Assistance and Support Some individuals show negative responses to change and "tend to be shortsighted, rigid, and dogmatic". Those who resist change often deny dissociation, use projection, act out, blame others, avoid difficulties, and have irrational thoughts about the change. (Garman, 2010) found in his study, that providing additional support can help to manage resistance to change. Assistance and Support are needed when employees resist change because they have difficulties in adapting (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1999). Moreover, the role of being a leader in change includes supporting employees in the process of implementing change (Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006).

## - Education and Training

(Paton &McCalman, 2000) found that within an organization, resistance can arise because individuals think not to have enough skills and competence. Therefore, education can be a possible facilitator to overcome resistance to change. With training, the confidence and capabilities of individuals dealing with change can be increased (Garmin, 2010). For instance,

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(Geller ,2003) provides an example of an appropriate education that enables employees to understand why and how change is getting implemented. The author states with the proper education, people can develop personal responsibility for an action plan rather than doing something a certain way because a manager is holding them accountable.

## 2.3.2 Managing and Overcoming Resistance to Change as an Organization

Possible ways to reduce resistance by making adaptions in the organization itself will be described in more detail.

## - Leadership

Authorities have an enhanced impact on individuals (Gazzaniga et al., 2017) and can influence resistance to change (Carpenter et al., 2004). For implementing change successfully, managers need to identify themselves with the characteristics of being a leader. To promote the competencies of being a leader, personality development and leadership training can be an option, which improves the competencies in managing change.

Adopting the appropriate leadership style can be a challenge for managers. Therefore, (Garman, 2010) suggests that leaders should find a way to be collaborative, which is most effective for overcoming resistance to change. The researcher implies to "encourage collaboration, facts, and logic in managing while avoiding the use of power and coercion." (Goleman, 2000) states that leaders can make use of different styles, for instance, an authoritarian leadership style, where clear commands are given, a visionary leadership style, in which the future state is explained, an emotional leadership style, where the harmony and emotional bonds are in the foreground, an democratic leadership style, where participation is enabled, a tempo-setting leadership style, which gives expectations of excellence and self-government, or a coaching leadership style, which is about the development of the future.

## - Organizational Structure

If the organizational structure is organized through hierarchies, evidence shows that it can increase resistance to change. There can be different forms, how organizations are structured. For implementing change, a learning organization structure can be useful, as in these organizations, learning, experimenting, and reflecting are done. These characteristics are needed within change and to decrease resistance to change. (Garvin, 1993) Moreover, it should create a balance between stability and change within the company, as the goal is to create continuous improvement processes of organizational change. (Kühl, 2017) A learning organization consists of five main aspects:

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- ➤ Personal Mastery: focus on the personal development of individuals to encourage their creative tension, commitment, and openness.
- ➤ Mental models: principles of thinking, acting, and feeling must be recognized, named, and examined to determine whether they are beneficial or detrimental to the overall objectives.
- ➤ Common visions: an exciting and challenging vision promotes commitment and motivated cooperation. It is about shared and attractive visions, common goals, and values.
- ➤ Team Learning: learning within the team succeeds with an open atmosphere where everyone is willing to review and discuss their assumptions and locations. Openness for new and unknown things is important.
- System Thinking: system thinking aims to raise awareness of the interrelationships and exchange relationships both within the organization and with the environment. (Kühl, 2016)

## - Culture

The environment plays an important role if resistance arises (Cameron & Green, 2015). Thus, the culture within organizations itself is relatively resistant to change (Müller & Vatter, 2009). In general, the organizations' culture consists of human relations, systems, goals, and internal processes (Meyer et al., 2010). Evidence shows that the culture can influence change implementation and can either be a driver or a barrier (Baird et al., 2011). (Weiner ,2009) states that organizational culture can decrease or increase readiness for change.

## Conclusion

A change project represents an important investment for a company and its failure is very heavy of consequences. Today, a large majority of these projects encounter difficulties because they focus on purely technical aspects, leaving aside the social and leaving aside the social and human dimensions. These failures are linked to an insufficient analysis of the needs and an underestimation of the support to change. In this sense, change or disappear becomes an important issue at the level of management level. Change is often perceived as a source of difficulty if it is poorly supported, and manifests itself in resistance to change, a factor in the decline of competitiveness. The individual, faced with a new situation that he or she did not choose, cannot understand the change, and in this case, his adhesion is compromised.

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Understanding the motivation of individuals to resist change then becomes necessary to to guarantee effective change.

We must not wait for resistance to change to manifest itself. We must anticipate them in order to reduce and defeat them. For this, it is advisable even before the appearance of a change, to master all the factors that can lead to its rejection. One of the best ways to eliminate resistance to change is educational support will allow employees to better understand the efforts that will be required of them. It is also a good way to reduce or eliminate the rumors inherent in the implementation of change. »

Managing employee resistance to organizational change is crucial for the success of any transformation initiative. Resistance often stems from fear of the unknown, loss of control, and disruption of routines. To effectively manage this resistance, leaders should focus on clear communication, involving employees in the change process, and providing support and training. Creating a sense of psychological safety and recognizing positive behaviors can also help in reducing resistance. By addressing the root causes of resistance and engaging employees throughout the process, organizations can navigate change more smoothly and achieve their desired outcomes.

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