



Dear ODyssey,

One of the key initiatives for my OD team this year is to launch the use of a new employee portal, which we hope will help foster cross-department collaboration.

A key difference of the new employee portal is that it no longer has departmental web pages. It has instead web pages structured along functional lines, which cuts across various departments. The intent behind this change is to discourage a silo mentality, and instead foster a more collaborative approach towards work. This however would require employee to adopt new work habits in order for the new employee portal to be successful in facilitating collaboration.

Based on past experience, the employees in my organisation tend to resist change, and I have been advised by my leader to take note of this when launching the new portal. What about the people that I should take note of when implementing change? How can I address employees' resistance to change if it exists?

*Yours Sincerely,
OD Practitioner*

Creating the Acceptance for Change

By Jovel Ong and Christian Chao

Change management is not just about developing a sound initiative and setting project milestones. Creating the acceptance for change by the employees will make a difference on whether the change will be successful.

Dear Practitioner,

Before I respond to your issue, I would like to pose you this question: How does one achieve effective change?

- A. By developing an optimal solution based on proper diagnosis to identify the root issue so as to bring about the desired change or results.
- B. By ensuring that the solution will be accepted by the affected stakeholders so that they willingly adopt new behaviours in support of the change.

Did you pick both options – i.e. A and B? If you did, you have chosen wisely.

“Ensuring that the change will be accepted” is just as important as “determining what change to make”.

Unfortunately, the general tendency among us is to focus on developing a well thought-out solution (i.e. what we want to change), while grossly neglecting how to foster acceptance of the solution (i.e. how we implement the change). Although communicating change is an increasingly common practice in the Public Service; simply ‘informing’ the affected stakeholders of the impending change does not translate to them accepting the change. Change acceptance is achieved only when the affected stakeholders demonstrate the behaviours that support the change.

In this issue, we take a closer look at the psychology of managing change; more specifically what we can do to foster ‘acceptance of the change’ by the affected stakeholders.

WHY DO PEOPLE RESIST CHANGE?

To address the question on what we can do to foster acceptance of the change, we should first understand why people resist change.

According to Chip and Dan Heath, authors of change management book *Switch*¹, there are three possible reasons to why people appear to resist change. What looks like resistance could in fact be due to:

- lack of clarity on what they are expected to do
- psychological exhaustion (i.e. depletion of 'self-control energy')
- situational factors

1 Lack of clarity on the expected behaviours

When people do not seem to want to do anything, it may not be because they are resisting change. They are not doing anything (i.e. keeping the status quo) because they do not know what exactly it is they should do in response

to the change.

Two health researchers in West Virginia wanted to address what seemed to be people's resistance to eating a healthier diet. What they discovered was that when a clear and specific behaviour was communicated to the people, the likelihood of change acceptance increased. In their case, instead of simply communicating the generic need to 'eat a healthier diet', they asked people to do something very clear and specific - they encouraged them to 'Buy 1% Skim Milk'². The result was more people buying 1% skim milk, and as a consequence the end outcome of more people starting to eat a healthier diet was achieved.

When people lack clarity on exactly what it is they should do or behave, they keep with the status quo, and in so doing create the impression that they are resistant.

2 Psychological exhaustion

People exhibit resistance to change when they are psychologically

exhausted, more specifically they deplete their 'self-control energy' needed in performing the desired behaviours.

Studies³ have found that 'self-control' is an exhaustible resource. When people are required to change behaviours that have over time become automatic, it requires them to make a conscious effort in performing the new behaviours. This uses up 'self-control' energy. When people exhaust their self-control, they exhaust the mental muscles needed to persist in



General Electric (GE) developed a simple Change Effectiveness Equation that illustrates the importance of doing both A and B.

Change Effectiveness Equation
 $E = Q \times A$

Effectiveness (E) of the change is the product of the **Quality (Q)** of the technical solution and the **Acceptance (A)** of the change that the solution will create.

The 'multiplicative' nature of this equation illustrates that even if the solution is very well-developed (or even near perfect), as long as the acceptance of it is low, the desired results of the change will be limited.

“Unfortunately, the general tendency among us is to focus on developing a well thought-out solution (i.e. what we want to change), while grossly neglecting how to foster acceptance of the solution (i.e. how we implement the change).”

¹ The Book "Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard" (2010) is written by Chip and Dan Heath.

² The story of the 'Buy 1% Skim Milk' study was published by Booth-Butterfield and Reger (2004), "The Message Changes Belief and the Rest Is Theory: The '1% or Less' Milk Campaign and Reasoned Action," Preventive Medicine, 39, 581-588, and cited in Switch (2010).

³ A few studies from Journal of Personality and Social Psychology were cited in the book Switch (page 270).

“What looks like resistance could in fact be due to lack of clarity, psychological exhaustion or situational factors.”

the face of frustration or failure. So when this energy is exhausted before they experience some kind of reward for their efforts, they give up trying to change their behaviours. This therefore creates the impression that they are resistant.

This explains why people tend to grow increasingly resistant to change when it happens at too frequent a rate. It also explains the rationale behind having many small celebrations during the change process. Celebrations function like psychological ‘petrol stations’, where people get to refuel and be encouraged to persist in changing their behaviours.

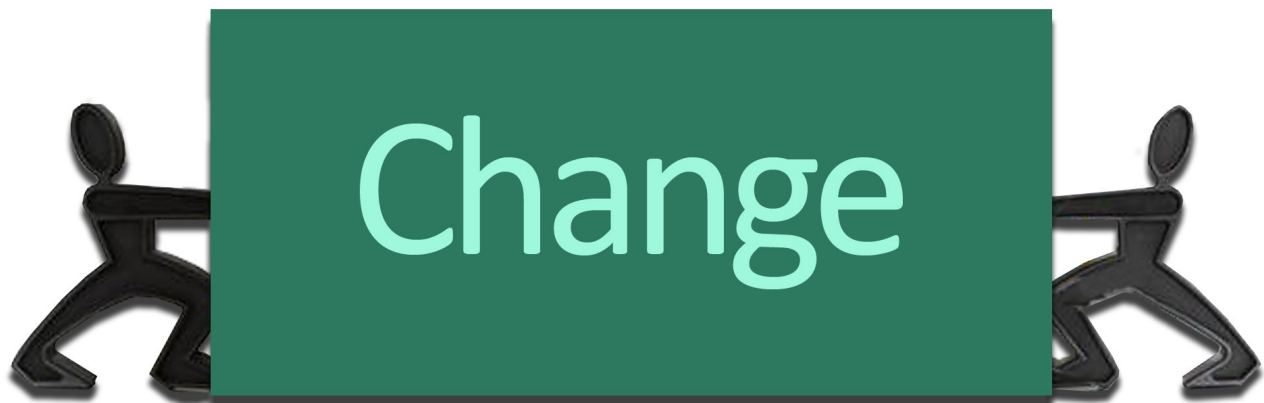
3 Situational factors

People exhibit resistance to change when the situation they are in influences them (whether consciously or unconsciously) to behave in the certain manner.

Lee Ross a psychologist from Stanford found that there is a deep-rooted tendency to attribute people’s behaviour to *the way they are* rather than to *the situation they are in*. This tendency is called the ‘Fundamental Attribution Error’⁴. We can avoid this error by paying attention to the situation people are in and not pre-maturely assume that they are simply being resistant.

This idea that ‘*the situation people are in*’ affects behaviour is echoed in the emerging field of Behavioural Economics. In another study⁵ on healthy eating – this time it was conducted at Cornell University involving the students there – researchers wanted to study the effects of payment methods (situation) on food choices (behaviour). What they discovered was that the form of payment method led to significant difference in eating behaviours. Students using restricted-debit cards were found to eat more healthily than those using unrestricted debit cards – they ate less calories and more nutritious foods; they also ate significantly less sugar, total fat, saturated fat, and caffeine.

The situation people are in (i.e. the surrounding structures and conditions) has an influence on their behaviour. When the situation (which is dictated by existing processes, policies, platforms and culture) they are in has been ‘optimised’ to influence ‘status quo’ behaviours making it difficult for them to adopt the new behaviours, it creates the impression that they are resisting the change.



⁴ More information on Fundamental Attribution Error can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental_attribution_error

⁵ More details on this study can be found at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/AmberWaves/March09/Features/LunchLine.htm>



How do I do it?

HOW TO CREATE ACCEPTANCE FOR CHANGE?

Now that we have an understanding on the possible reasons why people appear to resist change, we can proceed to create acceptance for change by addressing one or more of these reasons.

1 Provide crystal clear direction——

We need to provide crystal clear direction regarding the expected behaviours we want employees to exhibit. This means stating what the specific behaviour is, as well as when and where this behaviour should be exhibited. For instance, instead of simply asking employees to 'use the employee portal', we encourage them to do something specific like 'post a question [behaviour] on the portal's discussion forum [where] whenever you encounter a challenge doing work [when]'.

The other way to achieve clarity is to limit the number of messages being communicated to the employees. Dan Heath, the author of 'Made to Stick' shared a story⁶ of a trial lawyer who

held a focus group with the jury after every major case. His one overriding conclusion based on these focus groups was that if you make 10 arguments to the jury, no matter how good each argument is, by the time they get back to the jury room, they'll remember nothing. In other words, if you say ten things, you say nothing! To achieve clarity, we need to select carefully what messages to communicate. Clarity is achieved when we communicate a few messages, and communicate them frequently.

The third way we can achieve clarity is by involving individuals that hold influence in the communication process. This includes leaders, influential peers, and senior colleagues that over time have become respected. Perhaps the best form of communication takes place when these influential individuals not just endorse but role model the desired behaviours.

In fostering acceptance for the new employee portal, we should therefore consider the following:

- For each stakeholder group, what are the (one to three) specific behaviours expected of them?

- How are these expectations being communicated to them?
- Are influential individuals visibly role modelling the desired behaviours?

2 Pay attention to emotions, not just rational propositions——

People are cognitive and emotive beings. This means we cannot merely depend on a rational case to foster acceptance for the change. We will also need to pay attention to engaging the emotions of the people, and find ways to refuel their 'self-control energy' so that they persist in wanting to make that behavioural change.

One way to engage the emotion is to help people 'feel' the change and not just 'know' the change. A common way to achieve this is through stories. Stories are useful because it has the ability to elicit an emotional response. Telling a (dramatic but credible) story of how employees from different departments experienced success when they started collaborating using the new employee portal could therefore serve to create acceptance for the change.

⁶ The video interview with Dan Heath and the transcript can be found on <http://www.fastcompany.com/video/presentations-that-stick?nav=inform-rl>



3 Situate (or structure) for success

We need to be cautious in not making a 'fundamental attribution error' and pay attention to the situation people are in – what are the existing processes, policies, platforms and culture that can influence their behaviours. This is especially pertinent when we begin to notice a certain 'pattern of behaviour'. For instance, if a certain profile of employees demonstrates similar behaviour in resisting the Change, it may be due to situational factors. In such an event, it will be useful to conduct a focus group discussion and/or observe this group of employees at work, in order to identify possible situational factors that may be causing them to resist the change.

Besides addressing the situational factors hindering people from behaving in the desired manner, we can also be proactive in 'structuring' the right situations to make it conducive for people to exhibit the desired behaviours. For instance, we could set it up such that the default page of the computers located in the meeting rooms are on the discussion forum page where work-related questions can be posted or viewed. This makes it easy for employees to post questions they may have during the course of their meeting.

In fostering acceptance for the new employee portal, we should therefore consider the following:

- What are the situational factors that may be influencing employees to resist the change?
- How are we addressing these situational factors?
- How can we 'structure' the right situations to make it easier for employees to demonstrate the desired behaviour?

The other way to pay attention to emotions is to 'Shrink the Change'⁷. This is achieved by breaking up the entire change effort into manageable pieces, thus allowing for small wins. Having small wins fulfils a human desire for 'instant gratification'. While it is possible to delay gratification it comes at the expense of people having to exercise 'self-control', which we now know is limited. To facilitate acceptance of the new employee portal, it will be useful to plan out what these small wins will be and how they will be celebrated.

In fostering acceptance for the new employee portal, we should therefore consider the following:

- How are we communicating with the affected stakeholders such that their emotions are engaged?
- What 'small wins' will be celebrated along the change journey?



⁷ More information on 'Shrink the Change' can be found in the Book "Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard" (2010) written by Chip and Dan Heath.



Creating stakeholders' acceptance for change is a constant challenge because it involves time and effort on their part to develop new behaviours and mindsets. This challenge is further compounded if current work performance levels are not to be compromised as a result of involvement in the change. Different operating context, work cultures and circumstances would also require different strategies to manage the change effectively. Regardless of these varying contexts, the 'people factor' will always remain a crucial element in effective change management. We as OD practitioners should never neglect this.

Dear OD Practitioner,

I hope this article provided you with useful insights on how to address this common challenge of employee resistance to change.

As OD practitioners, we are often tasked to manage change in our organisations. We hope that through this article we will realise that there are techniques that can aid us in performing this role with greater proficiency. Knowledge of the techniques are however only one part of the equation. For it to work, we will need to learn to apply them in our work, which may require us to change the way we perform our tasks. So the challenge before us may well be in overcoming our own resistance to change.

*Yours sincerely,
ODyssey*

Contact us!



We welcome your thoughts and feedback about this article or any OD-related topics that you are interested in. Please email us at cscollege_COD@cscollege.gov.sg.

Key takeaways on creating acceptance for change

When people resist change because they do not know what to do, providing clear directions on the exact behaviours will help.

1

When people resist change due to psychological exhaustion, engaging their emotions beyond just providing rational propositions will help.

2

When people resist change as a result of situational factors, removing the situations that hinder while introducing ones that promote the desired behaviours will help.

3

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