Resistance and Barriers to Change

Despite the potential positive outcomes, change is often resisted at both the individual and the organisational level. Resistance is normal and can reveal issues that need to be addressed and resolved before successful implementation of new methods.

There are two broad types of resistance:-

**Passive resistance** - is seen as people carrying on with old ways of working, despite being aware of new needs and being shown new methods

**Active resistance** - is when people outwardly challenge and argue against the change itself or why they should not need to change

It is often the perception of the change that is resisted rather than the change itself. Understanding and addressing that can help remove the barriers to introducing change.

According to Kotter and Schlesinger (1979), there are four basic causes of resistance to change:-

1. **Parochial self interest** - individuals are more concerned with the implications for themselves
2. **Misunderstanding** - communications problems and inadequate information
3. **Low tolerance of change** - sense of insecurity and lack of stability in work
4. **Different assessments of the situation** - disagreement over the reasons for change and the advantages and disadvantages

**Organisational barriers to change**

- Structural inertia & blockages in the system
- Existing power structures – changes can affect the balance of power
- Resistance from certain work groups
- Failure of previous change initiatives
- Organisational culture
- Lack of resources

**Individual barriers to change**

- Tradition and set ways: feeling of loss when old practices and traditions are replaced – ingrained satisfaction with the status quo, ‘better the devil you know’
- Loyalty to existing relationships
- Inability to accept the need for change
- Threat to personal security and career objectives
- Preference for the existing arrangements
- Vested interests in keeping things as they are
- Lack of active, visible and committed leadership
- Break up of work groups
- Different personal ambitions
- Fear of loss of power, loss of skills, the unknown
- Economic implications - loss of income, redundancy
- Fear of inability to perform as well in the new situation
- Ignorance of improvement goals and employees’ roles in achieving them
- Inadequate training and preparation for the change effort
- No or little reward or recognition for participating in the change effort
- Lack of organisational support
- Inadequate, infrequent, or incorrect communications about the changes
- Organisational power and politics – game playing
Change is often resisted because of failures in the way it is introduced:-

- Failure to explain the need for change
- Failure to provide information
- Failure to consult, negotiate
- Failure to provide support and training
- Failure to build trust and sense of security
- Poor employee relations
- Lack of involvement in the process
- Keeping people in the dark
- Creating excess work pressure
- Expecting immediate results
- Not dealing with fears and anxieties
- Ignoring resistance

Reasons why change can fail:-

- Employees do not understand the purpose or even the need for change
- Lack of planning and preparation
- Poor communication
- Employees lack the necessary skills and/or insufficient training and development
- Lack of necessary resources
- Inadequate/inappropriate rewards

Overcoming Resistance to Change

Kotter and Schlesinger identified six approaches to deal with resistance to change:-

1. **Education and communication** - if people understand the need for change and what is involved they are more likely to co-operate. Also reduces unfounded and incorrect rumours concerning the effects of the change.

2. **Participation and involvement** - to encourage people to be committed and have ownership of the change. Where the change initiators do not have all the necessary information it encourages others to bring relevant information to the change plan. This approach is likely to decrease resistance of those who merely acquiesce in the change.

3. **Facilitation and support** - listening to the real concerns of people affected and helping them adjust and deal with fear and anxiety. Resistance is likely to be the perception that there will be some detrimental effect.

4. **Negotiation and agreement** - agreement and compromise if necessary, may be by offering incentives when those resisting are in a position of power, can avert major resistance but may alert others to negotiate for compliance.

5. **Manipulation and co-optation** e.g. bringing a person who resists into a change management planning group for the sake of appearances and giving a symbolic role in decision making, can be a relatively quick solution but may lead to future problems.

6. **Explicit and implicit coercion** – threats used when speed is essential and the change initiators possess considerable power but this is a high risk strategy.

References