Commentary
Change Resisters: People Who Block Change Initiatives and 5 Tips to Overcome Resistance

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People don’t resist change. They resist being changed!

Peter Senge

Any time a change is undertaken in how a public health agency conducts business, resistance is quickly encountered. The authors have worked with a number of state and local health departments and have specific observations about the change process. We offer several concrete strategies to overcome seemingly insurmountable resistance often faced within the health department.

Experienced leaders know that organizational change is a traumatic ordeal for any organization and its employees. An integral part of any change process is resistance, so plans for change should anticipate and manage resistance. It is common that some people in the health department will resist any type of change that impacts them. The more the change is seen as radical and threatening, the more resistance one should expect.

The following are the most common resistor archetypes the authors have encountered along the winding road of change within health departments (see the Table).

● **Observations**

**Change leader role**

At the start of any new change intervention, there will always be a mixture of positive and negative opinions, accompanying strong emotions, and groups will form that are aligned with each camp. As a leader you cannot avoid the resistors but you can manage their behavior by redirecting their thinking. A change in thinking will result in the desired behavior aligned to the new direction.

Avoid change resistors at your peril. Failure to take action will undermine the new change effort. A “change leader” must be a consensus builder by pulling together key stakeholders, individuals, and resistance groups to engage their support in the change initiative. To build this consensus, the change leader must clearly communicate a compelling vision for the health department staff that refocuses direction, habits, and daily work activities. In addition, the change leader must be realistic and describe the challenges and consequences that will inevitably arise if the health department does not make the needed change.

**Five strategies for overcoming resistors**

1. **Speak to loss.** As Heifetz and Linsky assert in their book, *Leadership on the Line, Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*, “People do not resist change, per se, people resist loss.” Thus, the change leader must speak directly about loss and engage those with the most to lose, targeting those individuals to work closely with the change leader in the implementation process.

2. **Get them on the bus.** Jim Collins in *Good to Great* demonstrates through his research that great companies start by getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats. Change can include hiring outside talent or helping unproductive team members.

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members achieve a high degree of accountability or leave the team. Sometimes it seems like the best option is to kick resistors off the bus at the first stop, but when faced with organizational change, this is often not a viable option. Instead, the change leader faces the challenge of leveraging the skills and talents of the team to ensure that they are in the right seats. The change leader can get people on board by providing order, direction, and protection.

3. **Skin in the game or stockholders.** Kouzes and Posner\(^5\) have identified 5 practices of exemplary leadership. In fact, they have developed leadership profile inventories to assess one’s ability to accomplish these 5 practices. One practice is enabling others to act. Heifetz and Linsky similarly propose that leaders give back the work. One strong way to lead change is to divide the change process into manageable/actionable tasks. Then, create opportunities for change resistors to own that work and be accountable for the change process.

4. **Use humor.** Daniel Goleman was a leader in introducing the power of emotional intelligence. Since then, many business and leadership authors have written about the components of emotional intelligence at work, which include self-awareness.\(^6\) One of the hallmarks of self-awareness is a self-deprecating sense of humor. Effectively using humor helps leaders build rapport, reduce tension, and help people connect with each other.

5. **Celebrate success.** Be clear about what success means and define milestones. First, learn what your team members value so that the celebration and appreciation can be impactful. At each milestone have a plan for recognition.

### REFERENCES


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### TABLE 1 Types of Change Resistors

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<tr>
<th>Type of Resistor</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Their Perspective</th>
<th>Cautions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rods (retired on duty)</td>
<td>A unique breed of resisters who: simply do not care enjoy a cleverly crafted a position with a good title but limited responsibilities</td>
<td>“Even if I do a great job, I will only get a 1%-2% raise and it is not worth the effort.”</td>
<td>Have trained their managers to have limited expectations from them.</td>
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<td>Cheerleaders</td>
<td>Cheerfully support ideas, but when questioned about lack of progress have excuses about lack of control over barriers to implementation.</td>
<td>“I am all for it.” The implied part 2: “. . . if that’s what you all want to do, but I’m not owning it or participating in any meaningful way.”</td>
<td>Passive-aggressively will run out the meeting clock with questions that attack others while appearing genuinely interested.</td>
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<td>CCAVE Dwellers</td>
<td>Corporate Citizens Against Virtually Everything have never met a change idea they liked and have made a career of staying out of harm’s way.</td>
<td>“If I don’t attend the meeting and stay away from the gathering places, I can stay below the radar and nothing will be expected of me.”</td>
<td>Living a parallel but nonintersecting life within the organization; perpetuates low expectations of accountability.</td>
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<td>Voluntolds</td>
<td>Arrive at training or meetings clueless about what is expected and reserve their greatest enthusiasm for lunch and catered snacks.</td>
<td>“I’ve been taken hostage and must fight to avoid Stockholm syndrome.”</td>
<td>Without a clear or shared purpose, Voluntolds can derail change by bolstering others’ disengagement.</td>
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<td>Short horizon</td>
<td>Counting the days to retirement (even if that may be more than 365 d) and therefore own no part of the change process.</td>
<td>“Do not bother me—I won’t be here when this is done and I just want to coast out the door.”</td>
<td>Frequently have positions of formal or informal power and their attitude negatively influences others.</td>
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<td>Historian</td>
<td>Custodians of institutional memory work to bring collaborative sabotage to any new change initiative.</td>
<td>“We tried that already and it did not work.”</td>
<td>Build a climate of mistrust that poisons the change process and any innovative efforts.</td>
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<td>Teflon</td>
<td>Nothing—no task—sticks to the Teflon resistor.</td>
<td>Silence is golden. Redirect or reflect all requests.</td>
<td>Project roles and responsibilities must be clear to ensure shared ownership.</td>
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