

**Business Administration and Business Economics**

**Change Agent – A Force Generating  
Resistance To Change Within An Organization?**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to identify if the change agent represents or not a force generating resistance to change within an organization. The employees affected by a change process are usually the ones who oppose or new implementations. Their opposition is bigger or smaller, depending on the extent that they are affected and also by the direction, either positive or negative. However, employee's opposition can be potentiated or reduced, depending on the manifestation of the following forces within an organization: communications, the type of organizational structure, management style and organizational culture, forces which refer to the organizational climate. To answer our question, we have researched the current literature and discovered that the change agent can represent a force generating resistance to change within an organization in those situations when he or she identifies with a middle or top manager from the organizational pyramid. This information is valuable to researchers and practitioners, as for a long time, employees were considered the only ones manifesting resistance, the possibility that the change agent can oppose new changes being ignored.

**Keywords:** resistance to change; change forces; change agent; communication.

**JEL Classification:** O30; O39

**1. Introduction**

The dominant perspective that characterizes the resistance to change phenomenon is unilateral, favouring change agents (Ford et al., 2008). According to this view, change agents perform all their duties properly, while employees usually intervene with arguments and actions, considered to be obstacles. Therefore, change agents are the ones who want new changes to be implemented, but they can not do their job properly, as are always confronted with employees resistance to change.

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According to Prediscan (2004), there are five main forces that can generate resistance to change within an organization and those forces are: employees, communications, the type of organizational structure, management style and organizational culture, the last four, referring to the organizational climate.

The purpose of this research is to determine if change agents represent another force generating resistance to change, given those situations when he or she identifies with a middle or top manager from the organizational pyramid.

It has been accepted for a long period that employees are usually the ones who resist changes, while change agents try and do their best in convincing the first ones to participate and manifest their support. According to Kanter et al. (1992) and Bennebroek Gravenhorst (2003) all of the organization's members manifest resistance to change, except executive management. According to their research, when a new change is decided to be implemented, the executive managers are always confronted with line-managers and employees resistance. It is considered that resistance does not apply to executive managers, because usually they are the ones who decide about the changes (Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 2003).

Even if there are enough proves to sustain the above mentioned statements, some authors have a different view. In his research, Smith (1982) found out that top managers and all those who are in power usually are reluctant to new changes, trying "to maintain the status quo, not dramatically changing it". In support of this idea come Spreitzer and Quinn (1996) who, citing Dent and Galloway Goldberg (1999), in a study of 3000 Ford managers, discovered that middle managers were the ones who blamed executive managers for resisting change efforts. Studies have shown that middle managers can be both change agents, leading the change effort (Luscher and Lewis, 2008; Wooldridge et al, 2008), as well as change beneficiaries, resisting change initiatives (Feldman, 2004; Thomas and Linstead, 2002).

Analyzing the existent literature we concluded that change agents can represent a force generating resistance to change, especially through their actions. Further research could imply identifying others forces that can generate resistance to change within an organization, as it would be a mistake to think that employees represent the only force that manifests resistance.

## 2. Literature Review

The American Heritage Dictionary defines *change agent* as "a person who gives expert or professional advice". Ford et al. (2008) state that *change agent* is "the person responsible for identifying the need for change, creating a vision and specifying a desired outcome, and then making it happen".

Depending on the amplitude of the change that is desired to be implemented, the change agent can be represented by a manager or group of managers within the organization, specialists from outside, or a mixed team composed from inside and outside specialists (Prediscan, 2004). If the change agent is decided to be a manager from inside the company, to make the transition from manager to change agent, he must have the following abilities (Gilley, 2001):

- Understand and apply the objectives of the change process;
- Adopt change agent roles and responsibilities;
- Design and develop change activities;
- Demonstrate change agent competencies and skills;
- Implement and evaluate change initiatives.

An efficient change agent must hold all the necessary abilities and capabilities to initiate and successfully manage an organizational change process. The change agent should have enough knowledge in managing changes, knowledge of social psychology, communication skills, creativity and the last, but not least, credibility. Gaining employees attachment is not an easy task, which is why the change agent must communicate with them constantly or as much as possible, trying to convince them of the necessity of the new changes, presenting at the same time the potential benefits too.

### **3. Change Agent – A Force Generating Resistance to Change within an Organization**

All employees affected by a change process, regardless of their position in an organization, will manifest resistance to change.

We would like to propose a new force generating resistance to change within an organization, **the change agent**. Since usually a middle or top manager is decided to be a change agent, depending of course on the magnitude of the change, next we will emphasize on why it is better that the chosen change agent to be a person from a higher hierarchical level.

We highlighted these two levels, because when a new change is decided to be implemented, the organization's management usually selects a person from these categories. The selection of course differs, depending on the type and stretch of the change. The bigger is the stretch of the change, the better is to choose a person, in this case a manager, from a higher hierarchical level. Why? People usually have a greater confidence in top managers, especially in those who have seniority, trusting them more even in turbulent times.

Studies have shown that middle managers can be both change agents, leading the change effort (Luscher and Lewis, 2008; Wooldridge et al, 2008), as well as

change beneficiaries, resisting change initiatives (Feldman, 2004; Thomas and Linstead, 2002).

As Smith (1982) and Spreitzer and Quinn (1996) announce, executive managers and all those who have some power in the organization usually are reluctant to new changes, representing an important factor that causes resistance to change. They prefer maintaining the current status quo in the detriment of more radical changes. Those who usually want new changes are middle and bottom managers, while executive ones usually oppose. In such cases, we can no longer discuss about a planned change, initiated by top management, but by their subordinates. As resistance can manifest at all levels, we consider that it would be a mistake to focus only on the resistance manifested in top bottom changes. Since not all changes that are proposed to be implemented are beneficial, resistance from the part of middle managers and some top managers appears as a natural reaction.

Indeed, executive managers will never oppose their own ideas, but the situation is different when these ideas come from the part of the shareholders or their subordinates. First, when the change decision comes from the part of the shareholders, executive managers either obey, either leave the organization. Usually when a middle or an executive manager is chosen to be a change agent, he or she, is expected to perform well in all their duties. Despite that, there are cases when a change agent adopts an inappropriate management style, making obvious mistakes during the change process. They either do not perceive employees resistance, either do not understand the reasons why employees oppose new changes, either do not know and apply efficiently the reducing resistance to change methods. Some of the change agents can, through their actions, contribute to the increase of the resistance to change phenomenon (Ford et al., 2008). The possible actions of the change agent are: communicating an inadequate and inaccurate information, misleading and betraying employee's trust. As Cobb et al. (1995) state, change agents contribute to the increase of the resistance to change phenomenon from the part of the affected members by breaking or canceling agreements both before and during the change process, as well as by, failing to restore the subsequent loss of trust. Secondly, considering that they know better what to do and to not jeopardize their authority, often change agents ignore the ideas and proposals of the affected members, which leads to a further increase of resistance from employees part.

If change agents expect the resistance to change phenomenon to be manifested, then they most likely will encounter it (Kanter et al., 1992). Starting from the preconception that employees will manifest resistance, change agents will look for signs to confirm their initial assumptions. Since each change agent perceives resistance to change in his own way, in order to confirm his or hers hypothesis, they can classify as resistant those actions and non actions that in reality are just normal behaviours. It is normal when a change initiative is announced for people to

be curious and ask questions. They want to know more about the change process and it would be a mistake to consider such type of behaviour as resistant. Change agents should try and answer all the questions and involve employees as much as possible in the process, in order to gain their support.

Sometimes, in case of unexpected problems, the change agent may attribute the negative effects of the change process to the resistance to change phenomenon, but always, when a change will be successfully implemented, the success will belong to his efforts (Ford and Ford, 2010). From this point of view, resistance to change is often presented as being the source of all problems encountered in an organizational change process. In this way, change agents can transfer their own failures, as a result of some inappropriate decisions, on employees who manifest resistance, blaming them for the failure of the change process.

Further are presented two ways through which the change agent can enhance resistance to change (Ford et al, 2008).

### **3.1. Inappropriate Communication of the Need for Change**

The change agent can represent a force that contributes to the increase of the resistance to change phenomenon in those cases, when he or she, communicates inappropriately or poorly the need for change. The actions through which the change agent can increase employees resistance are: failing to justify the need for change, misrepresenting the change outcomes or by the inability to engage in the process all of the affected members of the organization.

Before getting involved in a change process, the affected members need to understand the need for change. The role of the change agent is to communicate clearly the need for change and in order to gain their support, to motivate employees properly. It is essential for the change agent to gain employees trust. Of course, some will ask questions. The change agent has to be prepared to answer all the questions and in those cases when he or she doesn't know the exact answers, to write down the questions, assuring employees that at the next meeting they will be provided. If at the next meeting the answers are not presented, change agent's credibility might be undermined. Since the change agent does not have all the necessary information about the process, some employees might consider him unable to implement the new change, losing their trust and confidence. The inoculation theory suggests that change agents who will not be able to generate convincing arguments to support their point of view, will end up increasing employees immunity and resistance to change (Ford et al, 2008).

Another mistake often made by the change agents is notified by Larson and Tompkins (2005), the authors arguing that change agents can be ambivalent. In an attempt to present the new change, they use the plans and techniques from previous

processes. Instead of focusing on the new change, they highlight the effects of the previous ones. In this way, employees are misled.

### **3.2. Misrepresentation**

Sometimes, to convince employees to participate to a change process or simply to “look good”, the change agent can intentionally distort the information. The change agent usually uses this technique when he expects employees to react negatively to a change decision.

However, not always a more favorable presentation is made intentionally. According to Lovallo and Kahneman (2003), change agents have a tendency to see things in a positive way. As a result, they will emphasize the positive aspects and minimize or ignore totally the negative ones. During the process and especially at the end, comparing the final results with the expected ones, some employees may have the feeling that they have been manipulated and lied. Their resistance will increase, employees losing their trust and becoming more cautious regarding future changes.

To gain the confidence of all of the organization’s members, change agents must provide accurate and realistic information. Both the presentation of the positive and negative aspects can reduce employees uncertainty regarding the success of the new change process and increase their confidence in the change agent.

Research shows that change agents who are honest, admit their mistakes and try to restore the relations with the members involved in the process from the beginning and during the change process, will encounter a much lower resistance to change compared to those who will not do so (Cobb et al., 1995, Folger and Skarlicki, 1999).

## **4. Conclusions**

All employees affected by a change process, regardless of their position in an organization will manifest resistance to change, as it is natural for people to oppose to something that may cause them a loss.

As stated above, people never oppose their own ideas, but the situation differs when these ideas come from others. When a middle or an executive manager is chosen to be a change agent, he or she, is expected to perform well in all their duties. Despite that, there are cases when a change agent adopts an inappropriate management style, making obvious mistakes during the change process. They either do not perceive employees resistance, either do not understand the reasons why employees oppose new changes, either do not know and apply efficiently the reducing resistance to change methods. Through their actions, such as communicating in an inappropriate way the need for change, misrepresenting the

information or being ambivalent, change agents can increase employees resistance to change. They mislead employees, lose their trust and as a result, can contribute to the appearance of more barriers to change.

After analyzing the existing literature, we concluded that the change agent can represent a force generating resistance to change within an organization regardless of the hierarchical level that he holds and in those conditions when he or she is not the initiator of the change process, when he or she has doubts about the efficacy of the proposed change or when he or she considers that the new change can not be successfully implemented within the organization.

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