



Distinguishing between destructive and constructive resistance in strategy implementation processes

Kimberly Rocheville^{a,*}, Jean M. Bartunek^b

^a Creighton University, 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178, United States

^b Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Ave, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Strategy implementation
Resistance to change
Organizational change
Change effectiveness
Recipients of change

ABSTRACT

The commonly expected response to new strategy implementation, or organizational change more broadly, is resistance. This resistance is often considered a hindrance to strategy implementation efforts, and as such, leaders are encouraged to overcome resistance in order to achieve organizational goals. In this paper we challenge the notion that all resistance is a hindrance. Instead, we encourage organizational leaders charged with strategy implementation to distinguish between destructive resistance and constructive resistance and engage with constructive resistance, an approach that should enhance the process of change. Drawing on examples from several different industries, we detail ways to distinguish between constructive and destructive resistance. We offer practical suggestions for managers and leaders to embrace constructive resistance to enhance strategy implementation processes.

Introduction

In 1985, the global soft drink company Coca-Cola launched a changed formula of its flagship cola product, branding the revised formula “New Coke.” Then Coca-Cola Company chairman and CEO Roberto Goizueta proclaimed that this strategic change might be the boldest and surest change in the packaged-goods business. Based on nearly 200,000 blind taste tests in the U.S. and Canada, the company confidently removed “Coke” from store shelves, replacing it with “New Coke”.

To the company’s surprise, however, this change resulted in widespread resistance from Coca-Cola’s customers and employees alike, including thousands of angry calls each day to Coca-Cola customer service, the formation of a group of loyal Coca-Cola fans calling themselves the “Old Coke Drinkers of America”, and public demonstrations and protests. Within days, public resistance to New Coke resulted in shares of the Coca-Cola Company dropping on the New York Stock Exchange. While this strategic change turned out to be much less successful than Goizueta promised, the company’s response to the widespread resistance provides key lessons for leaders of strategic change initiatives. In particular, Goizueta recognized many of the consumers’ responses as constructive. That is, Coca-Cola listened to their loyal customers and in doing so discovered a previously unforeseen value in their flagship

product: customers had developed a strong emotional bond to the product. Rather than try to *overcome* the resistance - the often-encouraged response by leaders to resistance to strategic change - the Company *embraced* the resistance and learned valuable insights from the resisters. Seventy-nine days after announcing New Coke, Coca-Cola announced the return of its original formula, now under the label Coca-Cola Classic. The company launched a new strategic marketing initiative to build on the consumers’ emotional bond with the brand. Engaging with and actively embracing the resistance, rather than attempting to convert the naysayers, allowed the company to resume its spot as the top-selling cola brand, as well as develop a deeper relationship with their consumers, while also regaining market share.

Of course, when organizations make strategic decisions that are resisted by their customer base (countering the expectation that the customers will applaud the decision), they often have a strong incentive to change. But what about when employees resist a change that organizational leaders developed to help them? This resistance is often not accompanied by public outcry, so the motivation by managers to respond may be less strong. But it is important for managers to understand how and when such resistance might actually be constructive.

We use the Coca-Cola example to challenge the common belief that leaders of strategic change initiatives should focus efforts on overcoming resistance. Instead, we encourage leaders to distinguish between

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: kimrocheville@creighton.edu (K. Rocheville).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2025.101127>

destructive resistance and resistance that offers opportunities for constructive collaboration with the resisters. Specifically, we examine some roots of resistance to change and determine when resistance is constructive (i.e., positive intentionality) rather than destructive (i.e., negative intentionality). We then provide suggestions for organizational leaders of strategic change initiatives to foster engagement with constructive resistance in ways that have potential to improve change outcomes. Of course, this involves engagement with organizational employees.

The first author conducted interviews about a major strategic change at a law enforcement department (that we refer to as Global Police Department - GPD) in a major metropolitan area. Facing the widely recognized mental health crisis in law enforcement, GPD was implementing a strategic initiative aimed at improving the mental health of its police officers, detectives, and emergency dispatchers (911 call-takers). The initiative was designed to be helpful to the department's officers. But when it met with resistance, department leaders attempted to overcome the resistance, seeing it as purely destructive. They dismissed and discouraged feedback regarding the plan, going so far as to file a disciplinary report against a few of the more vocal resisters. Ultimately, department leaders failed to overcome the resistance, and the strategic change efforts were abandoned.

The first author then interviewed representatives of several other law enforcement departments in the United States. These interviews revealed alternative approaches to implementing similar initiatives that embraced resistance that was encountered, and yielded more desirable outcomes.

Based on our interviews, we will discuss forms of resistance to change and managerial responses to it. We distinguish between the common view that resistance is destructive and a hindrance to be overcome, and the minority view that some forms of resistance are constructive and may improve change efforts. We suggest ways managers can distinguish between constructive and destructive resistance, primarily by discerning if it is positively or negatively intentioned. Finally, we introduce a four-step process that can help leaders of strategic change successfully embrace constructive resistance. We offer practical suggestions for leaders encountering constructive resistance that have the potential to enhance change implementation processes.

Application across industries

While the empirical data we draw on come from law enforcement organizations, we see similar examples across industries of the benefits of organizations embracing constructive resistance to change. For example, in the early 2000s, Ford Motor Company was facing losses of nearly \$17 billion. The company's proposed restructuring was met with resistance by employees who feared job displacement and a risk to their livelihoods. Ford embraced the resistance by creating forums for employees to voice their concerns while also fostering a culture of trust and employee involvement, leading to a return to profitability. Similarly, in the early 1990s, IBM shifted from primarily hardware-focused to a service-oriented business model. IBM CEO Lou Gerstner engaged his employees in open dialogue, wherein employees voiced skepticism and resistance rooted in concerns that they lacked the necessary skill set for this new business model. In response, Gerstner invested in training programs to re-skill employees for this new business model while also supporting continued efforts toward re-skilling. IBM's efforts led to a successful organizational transformation and a return to market leadership in IT.

Resistance to strategic change in organizations

Organizations that wish to remain competitive in today's rapidly evolving global landscape certainly will enact strategic changes. For example, facing huge losses and a surge of unfavorable reviews from health critics in 2006, McDonalds revamped its food offerings to include

healthier options. As a latecomer to the movie rental business, the DVD rental-by-mail service Netflix shifted its business model to online streaming, a major change that disrupted the movie rental industry, giving Netflix a huge first-mover advantage. During the COVID-19 pandemic, firms around the world enacted strategic change in response to policies that would otherwise limit their functioning (e.g., shifting to remote work arrangements). Regardless of their offerings, organizational leaders will be tasked with creating and implementing strategic change.

Formally, recipients of change include any stakeholder group affected by the change, although we will focus on employees affected by an internal change. As leaders plan and prepare to implement strategic change, they must also prepare for the reactions from their stakeholders. While the reasoning for and expected benefits from strategic change may be clear to change agents, these are often not clear to the stakeholders. When change agents implement change in a top-down fashion, a frequent stakeholder response is resistance, which includes any kind of negative attitude or behavior expressed during change.

Many leaders and consultants virtually ignore ways resistance, and employee voices more generally, might be helpful to change. John Kotter's book *Leading Change Management*, for example, suggests that resistance can be reduced by helping employees see the change in their own interests but does not explore how resistance may aid a change effort.

However, in his book *The Empowered Manager* (2016, p. 90), Peter Block recognized the importance of employee views. He wrote: "If we are thinking of changing direction, goals, or even structure, it is important that we talk to people before our plans are firm. Tell people as much as you can, as early as you can. Dialogue takes place before the options are clarified and approval is received."

Block's argument suggests that change leaders' assumption that employees will automatically resist change ignores potential merit in stakeholders' concerns. It may foster managerial behavior that leads to negative change outcomes.

Consistent with this argument, we draw on examples from our interviews within various law enforcement departments as they took steps to implement a strategic change initiative with or without employee input. Based on our examples, we show some ways that change leaders have treated resistance as destructive or constructive, and the impacts of these differences.

The interview snippets we present below are from law enforcement personnel regarding strategic changes within their departments intended to facilitate emotional processing of traumatic events experienced at work. The changes addressed officers' needs to process traumatic events (e.g., death scenes, firing weapons, etc.) with people who have also "been in the trenches". As police sergeant Steve explained, many police departments have formed peer support teams, or Critical Incident Squads (CIS): "You talk to them, and they can help you try and figure things out. They can come up with a plan for you, or whatever... They're better equipped at dealing with that stuff." CIS leaders typically undergo special training in critical incidents and stress management. They are expected to serve as confidential sounding boards for any member of their department facing emotional challenges on the job. However, many police officers had considerable qualms about the introduction of CIS.

An illustrative interpretation of resistance

At GPD, Henry, a patrol officer, shared his thoughts on his department's announced new CIS initiative:

I think it's a liability, ass-covering by the department. I know everybody went out and got their training and that's fantastic. Does it make me feel like if something happened and I needed to maybe talk to somebody in a peer support environment that it would make me feel good? No, I would rather go to a different agency to talk to

somebody. I would rather do anything than talk to anybody in this department—I mean, you work at a place long enough, you get to know people and you get to go, “Really? When I’m feeling shitty, I’m gonna come talk to you guys? Because you went to a week of training? No, thanks.

Henry’s discontent with the plan for the CIS peer support system was evident. It was interpreted by his superiors as destructive, and therefore, a barrier for them to overcome. But this interpretation, while consistent with common understandings of resistance to change, was incomplete.

Impacts of assuming resistance is destructive

As described by Roy, a captain in GPD,

We had the idea about a year or two ago when Joey approached us and offered to help set up our own CIS here. I know how these guys are, you know, and I wasn’t optimistic about it but I figured, the hell, we might as well give a try. These guys here don’t want anything new except socks and boots. Everything else they’d rather I just go to hell than make them do something new. [When] we switched the cruisers to the SUVs, you’d think I was asking them to patrol on unicycles; they were so up in arms. It’s like, ‘guys, it’s an upgrade’ but they’re pissed because the tech is different. It’s like I can’t win... So with this CIS, I’m wondering how many pissed off emails am I gonna get? How many complaints? They ain’t (sic) quiet when they don’t like it. I’ll know right away.

While change leaders’ anxiety about negative responses is understandable, such reactions do not facilitate curiosity or engagement; rather, they trigger leaders’ “fight mode”, where change resisters are seen as enemies to overpower. As Captain Roy continued to discuss the anticipated resistance at his department, he added, “I’m not giving in this time. This is happening. No discussion. No “but what if we...”. No. They all just need to fall in line and let it work.”

The captain’s reaction to anticipated resistance is understandable, as literature has largely framed resistance as a destructive force that must be overcome in order to achieve strategic goals. Since the 1940s there have been nearly 8000 published articles and books containing the phrase “overcoming resistance to change” in the title. This pervasive view of resistance as destructive extends into common managerial training; managers are often taught to use persuasive tactics to convince even the strongest resisters to adjust their thinking about the change. This follows the fear-based “fight” reaction noted above, which promotes defensiveness about one’s position and aggressive tactics towards perceived opponents, rather than curiosity and constructive engagement. When leaders expect resistance to be purely destructive, their reactions increase the likelihood of resistance becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially if leaders create a combative context for which the change to unfold.

Strategic change leaders typically see themselves as thoughtful, rational, intelligent, and well-intentioned individuals. Therefore, it is easy for them to think that any change they suggest is objectively the best path forward. If that is true, then anything that stands in the way of their idea coming to fruition is detrimental. This view implicitly considers change recipients to be mere passive actors in the positive change process, rather than as potential collaborators who are also thoughtful, rational, intelligent, and well-intentioned themselves. It implicitly assumes that resistance is detrimental and likely not to be worth consideration.

But *constructive* forms of resistance may actually enhance the change effort, and thus should be welcomed. It is important for leaders to recognize differences between resistance that has the potential to be constructive (such as the Coca-Cola example) and resistance that may be destructive.

Recognizing resistance as constructive

As we described above, some recipients of change may have important feedback regarding the change and may wish to share it in order to improve the change. However, they might hesitate to do so for fear it will not be heard as intended. Consider patrol officer Theo’s response to the proposed CIS at GPD:

You’re like, all right, what’s this gonna do if I vent this? What happens to me? Where is this gonna go? Is this just gonna create more stress for me? Is it worth friggin’ bringing up? Do I look like a cry-baby? You know what I mean? Yeah, you do. You’re kinda like, is it worth it? Is it worth it? Is it worth addressing, or is it something I can eat and swallow and friggin’ hold onto?

In his interview, Theo was sharing his concern with the process as it had been designed. His distrust was consistent with a broad feeling expressed by many in the GPD that there was a lack of psychological safety within the GPD. In other words, the officers did not feel safe taking interpersonal risks like sharing their feelings or surfacing their concerns openly without fear of negative repercussions. This fear was a result of the norms long present in GPD, where sharing one’s feelings was not only counter normative, but had been known to result in an officer being seen as weak or unfit to continue in law enforcement. Had Theo been able to discuss this with those implementing the CIS, rather than with us in his interview, the GPD leadership could have tackled the real issue at hand first, the lack of psychological safety in the department. Without that crucial foundation, the CIS could never achieve its desired results at the GPD.

To get to the core of what matters to stakeholders, leaders of change can encourage resister constructive feedback and participation early, and throughout the change process in ways that feel safe to participants. Feedback from key stakeholders is a useful mechanism for surfacing constructive resistance, and has been linked to improved change-related outcomes.

At the GPD, the change effort was intentionally not participative. As Captain Roy stated, there would be “no discussion” and officers were expected to simply “fall in line.”

But GPD officers had several legitimate concerns. One they discussed in interviews was the list of trained CIS officers who were to be the confidential peer support personnel. Many officers and detectives questioned whether the selected CIS members were right for the job: “I don’t think they [trained CIS members] have really been through it so how are they supposed to help me?” (George, Detective). Similarly, patrol officer Henry described the CIS members as, “the worst people... it’s an awful group...”. Of our 44 interviews at the GPD, not a single person said they were using the CIS to process difficult events, and as noted above, ultimately, GPD leadership considered the CIS a failure. But perhaps if different officers had been chosen by a participative means, a different outcome would have occurred.

In our broader set of interviews with law enforcement officers across the U.S., we found that many police departments approached the change in a different way than the GPD. Several of our interviewees described being actively involved in their department’s strategic initiative to create a peer support system. Jerry, a state trooper, explained that “we were all included when the idea first came up. As you’d expect of a bunch of macho meat heads, we weren’t excited about it at first.”

Despite their resistance and original discomfort, Jerry explained that he and others were routinely asked to share feedback on the peer support system at their department. This included encouragement to share views that might be seen as resistant, or in Jerry’s words, “angry bitch sessions” with the change leaders. Jerry said that “I can’t imagine it would have worked out as well any other way.” By the time we interviewed Jerry, his department’s peer support system had been functioning well for some time. He shared,

We're at the forefront with our department. We have one of the leading peer assistance teams that's become a model across the nation. We've paid a lot more attention to the impact of cumulative events and we now have two clinicians that our department contracts with to provide an environment where we can have complete privacy and confidentiality. And people use it because we've accepted them [clinicians] as trusting and safe. They even come to the scenes with us sometimes and having that support is huge...I feel like I can talk to pretty much anyone about anything. We've all been through the same things, we're all doing the same job, so I think I could talk to anyone about that [difficult event] whenever I needed to.

This trust and safety in Jerry's department exists in stark contrast to the lack of psychological safety at the GPD. Note that Jerry attributed the success of the peer support model at his department to the way in which it was implemented – through a participative process of engaging resisters throughout the change process.

In other departments that implemented successful peer support programs, engaging constructive resistance proved to be a powerful mechanism to invite collaboration in the strategic change effort. Such collaboration improved the outcomes of the strategic change as well as the sense of community within the department. For example, Brian described that at the start of his department's implementation of a peer support program, he felt "stubborn and reluctant" to change. However, there were productive, collaborative meetings between the patrol officers and the administration leading the change. Brian described feeling that "they really listened to us and made some of the adjustments we suggested... like letting you choose who to go to [within the trained peer support members] rather than being assigned a particular person". Following these collaborative interactions and adjustments to the strategic change effort, Brian described feeling "more comfortable now that I can get the support I need [from my department] without needing any outside counseling or whatnot...It definitely brought us all closer together."

Deena, a police detective, described why collaborating in the design of the peer support process was so important:

The guys who ultimately decided what this would all look like, they haven't been on the streets in like a decade. For some, even more. And so they forget what it's like, forget how damn hard and how lonely it can be. It's like, you see a horrible crash scene and then it's on to the next call. But it doesn't leave your head. Those of us who are still 'in it' day in and day out were able to remind them [change leaders] that sometimes we don't have a chance to come back to the station and just talk to someone...Now we have a system where if you have a call that is considered traumatic, they'll send someone right to you if they can. You don't have to be alone with it if you don't want to be. It's a much better system.

Taken together, these stories demonstrate that there is the potential to simultaneously improve the change-related outcomes and improve workplace relationships by strengthening organizational members' sense of community at work through constructive resistance.

Discerning destructive versus constructive resistance

While we have thus far argued that not all resistance is destructive, we recognize that sometimes it certainly is. Thus, it is important for change leaders to distinguish between purely destructive resistance and resistance with constructive potential. Of course, some responses to change are positive, and these can be very helpful and encouraging.

To distinguish between constructive and destructive resistance, we address a previously unexplored nature of recipient response to change, **intentionality**. The key to distinguishing destructive versus constructive resistance is in discerning between resistance behaviors with *positive* intentionality versus those with *negative* intentionality. That is, is resistance aimed at positively improving the change initiative, or at least

addressing concerns that can be remedied, or purely intended to be disruptive? We will explore resistance that is positively and negatively intentioned below.

Constructive resistance: the role of positive intentionality

To explore the intentionality of resistance, consider again the example of CIS implementation at the GPD through story of Michael. Michael was a long-time GPD officer and a trained member of the CIS. Despite going through the training to become a member of the CIS, Michael was angry about the implementation of the program, and took several steps to exert resistance:

We're unionized and for a long time now I've been in some kind of leadership role with it. So I volunteered to be one of the trained CIS guys, like I volunteer for just about everything, just so I could be included and know what we're up against. Upstairs [administration] is always trying to push their agenda on us and pretend it's for us but it's absolute BS the way things have been done. We were all pretty pissed...I filed a grievance with the department, or matter of fact I filed several. There's got to be union involvement, this is a union matter. GPD leadership shouldn't be driving this and I'm doing everything I can to take back control. They don't know what we need or how a program like this should work for us – they only know how it should work to look good in the papers.

In this unionized system, filing a grievance was the official way for union members to voice a complaint with the department.

At the GPD, the patrol officers and detectives belonged to one union, the sergeants to a separate union, and all higher-ranking positions (i.e., lieutenant, captain, chief, etc.) were non-union. The CIS program as designed did not recognize rank differences, and therefore, ignored certain conflicts of interest inherent in cross-rank conversations about mental health that could inhibit the guaranteed confidentiality the administration was promising. While on the surface Michael's resistance may seem primarily negative, there is some positive intentionality in his actions. Through the grievance process, Michael was voicing legitimate concerns about the proposed "guaranteed confidentiality" of the CIS program. Had the GPD been open to engaging with these grievances – embracing Michael's concerns – they could have realized the constructive nature of his resistance, opening the potential to significantly improve the overall change effort.

Alternatively, consider the case of Michael's colleague Andy. Andy had a reputation at the GPD for his abrasive demeanor, earning himself the nickname "Angry Andy". Like Michael, Andy described resisting the CIS initiative, but in ways that differed from Michael's behaviors:

The CIS is a pile of horse manure, just like every other bright idea that comes from that little Leprechaun [the head of training at the GPD] and that's all the proof you need that it's manure. He comes into roll call [meeting at the start of shift] and 'blah blah blah, I did all this for you, blah blah blah.' I make it a point to torture him every time he comes in [laughing]. I'll ask questions like 'um, hey Lt., what makes you qualified to lead this [CIS] when you can't even get out of your booster seat to see the shit we have to deal with?' [laughing] It's hilarious. For real, I've sent emails to our union guys, emails to the rookies, emails to the Chief: 'Lieutenant Leprechaun is a joke and so is this CIS manure. I forbid my rookies from using this and lose respect for anyone who disagrees.'

Andy's intentions were not aimed at improving the change effort. Instead, they were purely disruptive to the effort and targeted at "torturing" the change leader. Aside from his personal dislike for the lieutenant in charge of implementing the change, Andy did not voice any real concern with the legitimacy of the program or any suggestions for improvement. Andy's actions reflected destructive resistance.

The stories of Michael and Andy demonstrate the distinction between positive and negative intentionality. They also suggest the value of

change leaders being prepared to be open to the resistance first, in order to engage in discernment about its potential positive or negative intentionality.

Of course, this discernment process is not without its own challenges. Change leaders may, quite legitimately struggle to accurately discern the type of resistance when there is little verbal exchange regarding it. Discernment, therefore, requires, first, an expectation on the part of leaders that other participants may be able to make a valuable contribution to the change. It then requires change leaders to create the expectation that dialogue is encouraged, will be heard, and that views from a different viewpoint from those of the leader will be welcomed, that might contribute to the change, even by highlighting potential problems. We address in later sections how to encourage this dialogue early in the change process.

The role of disengagement in the change process: is it resistance?

It is important to clarify the difference between resistance, which is a high energy response, and disengagement, a low energy response to change.

Disengagement is often conflated with resistance, but it is very different. Disengagement reflects negative feelings that are low in energy (e.g., sad or helpless), and may result from participants thinking that their viewpoints will not be considered, regardless of their potential merit. As examples of disengagement at the GPD, several officers reported avoiding any meetings on the CIS initiative and or deleting all emails on the subject. For example, Daniel described:

Sure, I know about the CIS or CSI or whatever they're calling it, but no one's gonna use it. Maybe they will. I won't but I don't really care either way...It's more about the Upstairs [leadership] trying to be all PC and keep a good image as if they care about [our mental health]. They run this place like a business, it's more of a business. That's how they make decisions. They don't care about us, if you haven't noticed...I just do my job and go home. They can do whatever they want to do with the CIS thing.

Daniel's comment reflects his disengagement. While he clearly does not support the CIS initiative, and expresses a sense of cynicism regarding the motive behind the strategic change, he does not actively share his thoughts with anyone. This differs from any sort of action-based resistance.

While not resistance per se, disengagement may provide important concerns to consider when launching large-scale strategic change. Disengagement may indicate larger issues that organizational leaders need to explore to improve the chance of successful strategic change.

Preparing managers and leaders to embrace constructive resistance

Based on our interviews with law enforcement officers around the U. S., anecdotal evidence of strategic change including Coca-Cola, Ford Motor Company, and IBM, as well as foundational research on strategic change implementation, we have developed a process designed to help managers and leaders tasked with strategy implementation to embrace constructive resistance in ways that offer potential benefits to the organization. The process details four steps that should be repeated until the strategy implementation is complete. Following these steps will help change leaders embrace constructive resistance throughout the strategy implementation process (See [Appendix A](#) for an actionable checklist of these steps). We see these steps as enhancing models of strategic change implementations such as Block's that encourage listening as well as those that overlook the value of resistance.

Embracing constructive resistance through participation in strategy implementation

Engage recipients in the change process

This first step is to consider that recipients of a change may in fact be able to add something constructive to a proposed change, and thus engage recipients in change processes regarding changes that affect them, not to act as Captain Roy and assume they will not be of help to the change. This will give a much better chance of errors being corrected early in the process.

Engagement can be accomplished using a variety of participative change processes. These may include everyone in the organization in a "town hall" style forum where they have an opportunity to voice their reactions, ideas, and concerns. Alternatively, engagement can involve representatives from all stakeholder groups (e.g., various departments, levels of hierarchy, external stakeholders, etc.) who will be responsible for sharing the reactions, ideas, and concerns of their stakeholder group. In some groups it may be helpful to use a structure such as a nominal group technique in which participants initially record their responses in writing, so that they feel safer saying what they really believe. Regardless of the structure, the idea of participative change processes is to provide an open forum for feedback designed to improve the change early, often, and throughout the change process.

One of the authors previously interviewed trauma surgeons at a large teaching hospital. There had been a strategic effort at the hospital to change the way negative surgical outcomes were discussed, recorded, and labeled within the hospital's systems. The effort was designed and implemented by hospital administrators, without input from the surgical staff.

As administrators had begun to implement the new process, they encountered resistance from the nurses, surgical residents, as well as the attending surgeons. Resisters described how the new system "shifts the way we talk about bad outcomes from a learning conversation to a blame conversation. That's counterproductive to the learning culture we've spent years building, and will lead to scared surgeons, not empowered surgeons." While this was not initially a participative change process – the surgical staff were made aware of the proposed change at the time of implementation, not before – once the administrators realized the response, they invited nurses, surgical residents and attending surgeons to represent their interests in change process meetings. Engaging with the resisters ultimately benefited the strategic change by creating a shared language and process for discussing and documenting negative outcomes, reinforcing the existing learning culture.

Participative efforts such as these seem counterproductive if change leaders are thought of as the sole arbiters of the best path forward, the implicit assumption driving advice to overcome resistance. Instead, we encourage change leaders to explore resistance as potentially constructive *feedback*, rather than purely as destructive *interference* with the change process. When reframed as feedback, leaders can invite change recipients to share their constructive reactions, ideas, and concerns throughout the change process. In addition to providing more feedback from resisters, doing so may encourage those disengaged from change to feel that they may play some role in it.

Distinguish acceptance from disengagement

Some participants may feel very positive towards the change. Leaders are, understandably, likely to feel validated by such positive reactions. But we encourage leaders to resist the urge to focus solely on positive feedback and to remain open to other responses. Further, some recipients may give the impression of responding positively because they respond so little, but this is really because they are disengaged from the change, so not providing any feedback on it at all. It is important to distinguish the two types of responses.

Further, change leaders can explore patterns of disengagement to understand whether it portends concerns beyond the scope of the

Table 1

Discerning negative and positive intentionality of resistance.

Characteristic of resistance	Positive intentionality	Negative intentionality
Focus of resistance	Directed at the process, suggestions, and goals	Directed at the people leading the change process
Specificity of feedback	Descriptive challenges to the proposed change	No rationale for negative feedback
Tone of resistance	Hesitance	Hopelessness or ire
Resister's role in change process	Willing to engage and contribute	Willing to pass judgment only

strategic change that could negatively impact the change, such as the organization's culture or leadership. For example, are certain groups/departments/ranks/identity groups more disengaged than others? While these issues are potentially beyond the purview of those tasked with leading a particular strategic change, they will likely interfere with the implementation of change and should be acknowledged.

Distinguish constructive versus destructive resistance

Leaders must also discern the extent to which the resistance they encounter is destructive or potentially constructive. As we described above, one way to do this is to consider the intentionality of the resistance. Can it help improve the change (i.e., positive intentionality), or is it targeted at disrupting the implementation of the change without concern for the betterment of the organization (i.e., negative intentionality)?

In Table 1 below, we detail four characteristics of resistance and what we expect to see from positively intentioned resisters versus negatively intentioned ones.

As we noted above, leaders should entertain resistance with positive intentionality. But behaviors with negative intentionality are more likely to be destructive towards it. The question is how to respond to them.

Returning to the example of Angry Andy's negatively intentioned resistance efforts, we observed the change leader reacting to Andy's resistance tactics. In one meeting in particular, the Lieutenant engaged in a heated verbal argument with Andy during roll call. This response encouraged Andy to continue his resistance, while further delegitimizing the Lieutenant to other officers at the GPD. The argument also indicated to others in the department that voicing resistance was not acceptable.

Instead, the Lieutenant could have acknowledged that feedback is encouraged, and then described a more appropriate forum and manner of sharing such feedback. This likely includes reference to the "what" and the "how" of sharing feedback. The "what" refers to encouraging feedback that focuses on the change process (not the people), with descriptive challenges to the proposed change. The "how" is about how to share feedback: while resistance/feedback may be driven by hesitance, discomfort, or unease, leaders are more likely to hear and work to understand when the feedback is offered with respect and some concern about the change itself (rather than solely hostility).

Therefore, we encourage leaders to invite feedback that is shared respectfully (e.g., not hateful/full of blame) and that focuses both on concerns and suggested paths forward to address identified problems. This will encourage positively intentioned resistance and make evident ways it can contribute to the change while not rewarding negatively intentioned resistance.

Continuously adapt strategy based on feedback

Remaining open to constructive resistance and engaging resisters in the strategy implementation process are not enough by themselves to reap the benefits of embracing resistance. Leaders must be willing to process the feedback received through their engagement with resisters and incorporate it into change.

That is **not** to say that all resistance should be incorporated into the

change. Instead, leaders should clearly communicate with all stakeholders the type of feedback they receive and the process through which they determine what feedback is incorporated and why. Doing so should increase the transparency of the change process, enhance participant feelings of efficacy and influence on the process, and demonstrate the merit and shared acceptance of the participative change process. Without a feedback loop to stakeholders, they may feel as if their feedback has been ignored and will be less actively engaged in responding to change efforts in the future.

Assess outcomes of the change process

Our process ends (temporarily, at least) with a (hopefully) successfully implemented strategy, or at least a beginning strategy that can be improved. It is important for leaders to continue monitoring the change outcomes and the stakeholder response to the change over time, just as Coca-Cola did, as there may be continuing opportunities to collect information to improve any future change initiatives in the organization.

Final thoughts: the role of organizational context

Not all organizations will experience resistance in the same way; nor are all organizations as likely to expect disengagement. Generally speaking, certain organizational conditions are likely to increase the risk of destructive resistance and disengagement. In particular, certain industry conditions (i.e., highly regulated, slow mover), hierarchical structure and leadership style (i.e., traditional vertical structure, autocratic leadership), and an organizational culture that values tradition, conformance, and risk-aversion will be more at risk for destructive resistance and disengagement. However, that is not to say that these organizations will not also seed constructive resistance; it just may be more difficult to discern. In these situations, clear and detailed communication regarding the change process will be crucial, as lack of transparency will exacerbate skepticism and fuel disengagement and negatively-intentioned resistance.

Conclusion

Most organizational change efforts are likely to be met with some degree of resistance from the recipients of change. Such resistance has often been considered a hindrance to strategy implementation, and leaders have been encouraged to find ways to overcome it. However, we have suggested new ways for change leaders to consider and respond to resistance. Our framework can help leaders distinguish between destructive and constructive resistance and make appropriate use of these to guide effective change processes in ways that enhance strategic outcomes for the organization and its stakeholders.

Suggested readings

Readers may find it helpful to review foundational papers on implementing strategic change upon which we build: Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading Change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.; Block, P. (2016). *The empowered manager: Positive political skills at work*. John Wiley & Sons.

There are several overviews on responses to strategic change: Khaw, K. W., Alnoor, A., Al-Abrow, H., Tiberius, V., Ganesan, Y., & Atshan, N. A. (2023). Reactions towards organizational change: a systematic literature review. *Current Psychology*, 42(22), 19137–19160. Oreg, S., Vakola, M., & Armenakis, A. (2011). Change Recipients' Reactions to Organizational Change: A 60-Year Review of Quantitative Studies. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 47(4), 461–524.

For a discussion of recipient responses to organizational change, we suggest: Oreg, S., Bartunek, J. M., Lee, G., & Do, B. (2018). An affect-based model of recipients' responses to organizational change events. *Academy of Management Review*, 43(1), 65–86.

To learn more about overcoming resistance to change, readers may enjoy: Battilana, J., & Casciaro, T. (2013). Overcoming resistance to

organizational change: Strong ties and affective cooptation. *Management Science*, 59(4), 819–836.

To learn more on views that challenge resistance to change as purely destructive, see: Ford, J. D., Ford, L. W., & D'Amelio, A. (2008). Resistance to change: The rest of the story. *Academy of Management Review*, 33(2), 362–377. Ford, J. D., & Ford, L. W. (2010). Stop blaming resistance to change and start using it. *Organizational Dynamics*, 39(1), 24–36.

For discussions on participant involvement in strategic change: Hood, E. A., & Bartunek, J. M. (2022). Encouraging employees' active feedback & participation when rolling out major changes. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 8(1), 47–58.

For further reading on the opening example of Coca-Cola and New Coke, the reader may find it interesting to read the following: Rocheville, K., Keys, C. B., & Bartunek, J. M. (2021). External communities as initiators of organizational change. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 57(4), 415–420. Oliver, T. (2013). *The real Coke, the real story*. Random House. Edmondson, A. C., & Jung, O. (2021) The turnaround at

Ford Motor Company. *Harvard Business School Case* 621–101, April 2021. (Revised August 2024). Hamel, G. (2000). Waking up IBM: How a gang of unlikely rebels transformed Big Blue. *Harvard Business Review*, July–August.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Bartunek Jean M.: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Rocheville Kimberly:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Neither author has a personal or financial interest that could affect our objectivity or analysis regarding the submitted manuscript. We have no competing interests.

Appendix A. Step-by-step guide for embracing constructive resistance through participation in strategy implementation

Engage recipients in the strategic change process

Acknowledge that recipients of change may have valuable insights to provide.

EX: Invite stakeholders to share their feedback throughout the change process. Explain that their feedback is valued, and treat it as so.

Use participative change techniques to initiate dialogue with change recipients.

EX: Create a means to collect feedback from stakeholder groups such as including representation from each stakeholder group to meet with change leaders throughout the process.

Frame resister dialogue as feedback, not interference.

EX: Model and encourage other change leaders to remove the word resistance and interference from change discourse. Instead, use terms like "stakeholder feedback" or "stakeholder insights."

Distinguish acceptance from disengagement

Resist the urge to focus exclusively on positive reactions.

EX: Assign at least one member of change team as champion of processing stakeholder insights (including negative reactions).

Be aware that silence is not necessarily acceptance, and may instead signal disengagement.

EX: If a particular stakeholder group does not share feedback, actively seek out their reactions.

Explore patterns of disengagement that could interfere with strategic change implementation.

EX: If front-line employees seem disengaged from the process, learn why this is so, and how to encourage it.

Distinguish constructive from destructive resistance

Explore the four characteristics of intentionality to discern positive versus negative intentionality:

- What is the focus?
- What is the level of specificity?
- What is the tone?
- What is the resister's role in the change process?

EX: Pay attention to characteristics of those giving feedback, including noting their purpose, precision, mood, and position

Reiterate the "what" and the "how" of expressing feedback/resistance.

EX: Establish ground rules for communicating feedback such as "disagreement with respect" and "problem- and solution-focused, not person-focused."

Continuously adapt strategy based on feedback

Be transparent with recipients of change regarding:

- How change leaders process feedback
- What feedback has been incorporated and why
- What feedback has NOT been incorporated and why

EX: Create a change newsletter for all stakeholders that shares summaries of feedback received, what was incorporated and why, and invites feedback on next steps.

Assess outcomes of the strategic change process

- Monitor change outcomes over time
- Monitor recipients of change responses over time
- Incorporate learnings into this and future strategic initiatives

EX: Measure employee attitudes to the change efforts in a survey over time and track key milestones in the change effort. Look for patterns and relationships between the two across time.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.