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Senior Leader Resistance

Learn more about senior leader resistance and what you can do when those in positions of power resist adopting new strategies, processes, technologies, or ideas.

Change Challenger #1

SENIOR LEADER RESISTANCE

Noor, A Managing Director, thought everything was going well. After meeting with her Executive Committee, there was no pushback to significant plans to overhaul the company's operating model.

Noor presents her plan for change at the Executive Committee Meeting.

Unless our business adapts, we risk becoming obsolete. The plan for change is....

Excellent! We're all on board.

That went well! Let's get going!

Outside the room, a different story was playing out.

I'm concerned about this plan.

We are, too!

People didn't want to be naysayers, but had questions and reservations.

How do we retrain entire teams?

I have questions about the process!

What about new supply chain protocols?

I think it's too much, too fast!

How does it affect my role?

As Noor celebrates a successful meeting, more senior leaders share their concerns about her change plan.

WHAT NEXT...

What is senior leader resistance?

Senior leader resistance occurs when those in positions of disproportionate power push back and resist adopting new strategies, processes, technologies, or ideas.

Ultimately, this can frustrate the progress of your transformation. It's tempting to think those resisting are wrong in these instances, but that interpretation is too vapid. There can be a multitude of reasons that leaders are resistant to change.

What does leader resistance look like

Let's dive in!

What does resistance look like?

Risk aversion

Leaders may resist change due to an inherent aversion to risk. This is especially prevalent in industries where stability is prized or in organisations that have experienced past failures with change initiatives. These leaders might prioritise avoiding potential losses over seeking potential gains, even when the status quo is demonstrably less effective.

Comfort with the status quo

Resistance here stems from a preference for the familiar. Senior leaders comfortable with the current state may see change as an unnecessary risk. This resistance is often rooted in a fear of the unknown, where leaders may worry about the impact on their role, their team's performance, or overall organisational stability. Their commitment to what has worked in the past can blind them to the benefits of proposed changes.

Subtle subversion

Because it's not always easily detectable, subtle subversion is potentially one of the most sinister forms of resistance.

Senior leaders who engage in subtle subversion might outwardly agree with the changes but fail to follow through, subtly undermine initiatives or foment dissonance.

Engaging in this type of resistance doesn't always have to be overtly hostile. It could be as simple as delaying actions or withholding information. At the more apparent end of the spectrum, they could openly question the motives of the change during informal conversations or encourage others to raise concerns.

Overwhelm and capacity issues

Sometimes, resistance is not about disagreement with the change but the capacity to handle it. Leaders may feel overwhelmed by the scale or pace of change, especially if they are already managing heavy workloads or complex challenges. This can lead to resistance as a form of self-preservation.

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Fear of irrelevance

Some leaders resist change because they fear their skills or knowledge may become outdated or irrelevant. This is particularly true in technological or innovative shifts. These leaders might resist not because they oppose the change but because they fear losing their mastery or status.

Resource guarding

Resource guarding occurs when leaders resist change because they're concerned about losing resources— budget, staff, access, or other things— even as minor as a parking space! They may fear that the change will divert resources away from their projects or interests, and therefore, they resist to protect their domain. This resistance can lead to turf wars and a lack of collaboration that hampers change initiatives.

Open pushback

Open pushback is the most open and direct opposition to change. It can manifest as vocal criticism, rallying others against the change, or outright refusal to participate. While this can be damaging, it's also the easiest form of resistance to identify and potentially address. Dissension can sometimes stem from a lack of understanding or personal insecurities about the change, necessitating clear communication and engagement strategies.

Disagreement with the strategy

This type of resistance is usually intellectual or philosophical. Leaders may genuinely disagree with the direction of the proposed change. Disagreement can be constructive if expressed openly and used to refine the strategy, but it becomes a problem if not expressed or appropriately addressed.

Politics

Primarily driven by personal agendas or political manoeuvring, senior leaders can resist change if they feel it threatens their power, influence, or personal goals within the organisation.

They may also resist due to alliances with others who oppose the change or because they're vying for a different direction that better aligns with their ambitions.

Perceived threat to culture

If the change is perceived as conflicting with the established organisational culture, leaders could resist—even if that's one of the change's goals! Being transparent about the cultural aspects of the change is critical in these situations because this is a particularly sensitive area around which to try to build consensus.

Lack of trust in leadership or the process

Resistance can stem from a lack of trust in those driving the change. If leaders believe that the decision-makers have not fully considered the implications or do not have the organisation's best interests at heart, they may resist. Building trust and demonstrating credibility is crucial in overcoming this form of resistance.

Inadequate involvement

Resistance can occur when leaders feel they have not been adequately involved in developing the change strategy. Their lack of input can lead to imposition and a lack of ownership, driving resistance even if they might agree with the change's objectives in principle.

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What are the effects of senior leader resistance

Senior leaders usually have an outsized influence in the organisation, so their lack of support for changes can have a profound impact.

When senior leaders are resistant, it can lead to the following:

1 Slower implementation

Their influence can lead to delayed decision-making, misallocation of resources, second-guessing the right path forward, and discouraging the participation of others.

These will lead to the change being implemented and adopted more slowly than planned.

2 Reduced morale and engagement

Sentiment from the top can trickle down in an organisation. If your leaders are engaged, your change can be more straightforward. If they're disengaged, it can spell trouble!

Don't underestimate how their disengagement can reduce the morale and engagement of others.

3 Loss of talent

High performers have options, and going through change, even a well-managed one, can encourage them to look elsewhere.

This is exacerbated when they sense discord amongst the organisation's leadership.

4 Internal competition

When leaders, especially those with significant influence over people or resources, aren't on board with the change, they can use their leverage to drive internal competition by influencing people to be uncooperative or direct required resources away from change endeavours.

5 Becoming a less effective organisation

The irony is that you set out on a journey of change to become a more effective organisation. Still, because of resistance, you do the opposite!

While leaders buffer through their own change journey, the world keeps moving, and their resistance can mean the world moves faster than the organisation can adapt to. The repercussions of this can mean loss of market share, decreased customer satisfaction, or loss of investor or shareholder confidence.

Tips to foster alignment.

Tips to foster alignment

When leaders resist the changes, it can cause a significant lag, and the opposite is true; When they are on board it can expedite the shift!

So, here are some ways that you could bring them on board.

Early, genuinely inclusive involvement

Involving leaders from the early days of the change allows them to influence the direction the change takes (just be careful that they don't dilute the change too much!).

Allow for early, genuinely inclusive involvement to build goodwill and trust.

Have a clear and compelling case for change

Just because the change is obvious to you doesn't mean it's obvious to everyone. So, investing time in building a straightforward, compelling narrative for the change can help you articulate the benefits more efficiently when the change is coming under scrutiny.

Help leaders adapt to their role in leading change

Don't assume that seniority automatically equals comfort or proficiency in leading through change. Leaders may need support in adapting their skills to lead through change. Helping them build change leadership capabilities will allow them to lead more purposefully.

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Align incentives with desired behaviours

One of the big mistakes we see is expecting people to adopt changes that disincentivise them. **For example**, if your change involves moving from a "country first" to a "region first" business model but your General Managers in each country are incentivised purely on their country P&L, it's going to be a struggle to get them to focus on the idea of "region first." Aligning incentives with desired future behaviours can help people accept the changes because there are tangible personal consequences if they don't.

Keep an open feedback loop

The change itself will change. So, keeping an open feedback loop with senior leaders is essential. This is best done when the senior sponsor for the change leads on keeping this feedback loop open with their peers.

Work the network

Sometimes, leaders need to hear about the change from a trusted source who can act as a harbinger of the new world's benefits.

Jonny McCormick
SENIOR DIRECTOR
People & Organisation Consulting Practice Lead
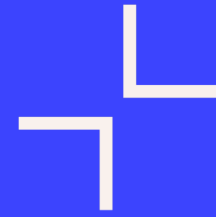
"Often, senior leaders who are resistant aren't doing it maliciously. If they are, that's a different challenge that must be dealt with swiftly and forcefully. However, let's assume that they're not being malicious. The absolute best thing you can do is **listen**.

Resistance often comes from **misunderstanding** or being opposed to some **discrete change element**. In these instances, **listening** and **engaging** in two-way dialogue are enough to quell concerns.

At times, resistance can be driven by more serious concerns (e.g. fundamental disagreement with the direction the change will take the organisation). If that's the case, **my advice is the same: listen**, **at least at first**. It can be tempting to jump in and explain the rationale or try to convince people immediately. But, first of all, take the time to really listen to their concerns – and I don't mean nod along.

Listen to their concerns and **try** to see the **world** from their **perspective**.

Why are they feeling like this?
What are they noticing that everyone else is missing?
What would happen if they were right?
Are there any nuggets of wisdom hidden in their concerns?"

REMEMBER! This

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WHAT NEXT...

Let's see what happens to Noor next.

Let's return to our example, with Noor, the Managing Director.

In this instance, **Noor** wasn't aware of any resistance.

She left the meeting feeling optimistic about the proposed changes.

When **Alison** started talking to colleagues and sharing her concerns, she discovered many had reservations. Importantly, everyone was committed to changing the business. The market was shifting, and unless the company adapted, it risked becoming obsolete over the next decade.

However, there wasn't a consensus that **Noor** believed existed around 'how' to change the business.

ALISON

Alison knew she wasn't the person to raise concerns with **Noor**. **Alison** is naturally too risk-sensitive, and she knew her concerns would be easily brushed off.

However, **Liam** could speak to **Noor** about this. Whilst they didn't always have the easiest relationship, there was mutual respect. **Liam** was considered a reformer in the business, so his concerns would likely hold more weight because he wouldn't be seen as too risk-averse.

LIAM

Liam and **Noor** chatted about the changes and how they were positioned in the Executive Committee meeting – he shared that there was some disquiet amongst the others but that no one had well-formed enough opinions to raise them at the time.

Noor was initially quite surprised to hear this, but on reflection, she realised that no one raising any serious concerns should have been a red flag.

NOOR AND LIAM

Here's what they did:

1 Leaders were involved and included with their concerns heard.

After **Liam** chatted with **Noor**, she immediately messaged the team on their group chat, asking them to get together soon and work through concerns about the shifts.

In doing so, she invited people to consider the changes and think through what they are concerned about in advance. She also acknowledged her mistake in not providing any significant insight in advance and expecting the changes to be "rubber-stamped." However, she was excited and could see a clear path to growth.

LISTEN. LISTEN...

2 Intentional work and time were taken to address concerns collaboratively and plan for them.

The team got together and started sharing their concerns. This happened several times over the coming weeks.

It became apparent that many of these concerns were legitimate and complex. However, they were still manageable. This simply meant they needed intentional work, enough time, and a different level of commitment and resources than initially imagined.
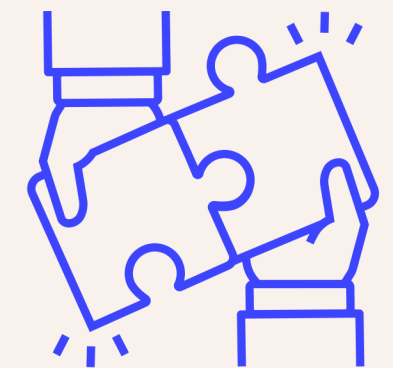
3 Realign, revise and commit to a new plan.

The team eventually realigned around a revised plan. The overall direction wasn't less ambitious, but the mechanisms to get there were much more realistic. Consequently, the team felt much more committed to delivering the plan.

Of course, outlining this in only three steps sounds effortless—the reality is that it required significant discussions (sometimes tense discussions!), replanning, and rebudgeting.

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Change is inevitable, but it doesn't have to be disruptive.

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Need help figuring out where to start?

Or do you already have a clear vision and need a reliable partner to help you get there?

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