

How We Shall Overcome Resistance

alternatives to panic

Haywood H. Martin

The haunting question for the management and organization development consultant is how to cope with initial resistance which invariably exists within organizations during the implementation phase of an intervention. It is common understanding among consultants that how this resistance is dealt with can mean the difference between success or failure.

Much has been written on the causes of resistance to change and principles have been proposed to overcome it; however, little information is available on planned specific actions which a change agent can take to deliberately deal with resistance.

Action Research Project

The purpose of this article is to report the results of an action re-

search project in which the participants present their perceptions of actions taken by the consultants which were helpful in effectively coping with resistance.

The actions which are reported are not intended to be interpreted as a panacea, but are shared with agents of change because they did work. The change agent is free to accept or reject these strategies as is deemed appropriate to individual consultant style.

This article is concerned with an analysis of consultant behavior which contributed to overcoming resistance to change, although the main purpose of the study was to determine the effects of three different organization development implementation strategies on organizational change in combat-ready military units. The strate-

gies consisted of conducting an *Action Planning Workshop*, a *Management Skills Development Workshop* and a *Survey Feedback Workshop*.

The participants chosen consisted of 52 key leaders from three company-size units of an Army Airborne Division. The training was conducted in normal work teams in group sizes ranging from 12-16. A fourth unit served as a control group.

The training staff consisted of three experienced civilian consultants in management and organization development. All consultants had some previous military service.

Since this article concerns itself with an analysis of the actions of the consultants which contributed to reduction of resistance to

change as perceived by members of the client system, only that portion of the procedures necessary for the understanding of that analysis is presented.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted at a site removed from normal work locations so as to preclude ongoing work interference. Each training condition was conducted for a maximum of 24 training hours over a four-day period. Two weeks in advance, each participant was sent an introductory letter which explained the nature of the workshop and what to expect. In addition, a member of the consultant team oriented each team leader.

A climate survey questionnaire was administered to each group. The results of this questionnaire, together with a participant evaluation instrument, would be used to evaluate the results of the experiment.

At the beginning of each of the three workshops, the consultant team conducted an orientation which included supportive introductory remarks by the senior commander of each participating organization, a get-acquainted exercise involving the participants and consultants, an exercise on current expectations and feelings about the workshop, a workshop overview which explained the schedule and desired outcomes, and workshop ground rules.

Results

Again, it is important to say that the results reported here are not based on the primary purpose of the original study, that is, to determine the effects of three implementation strategies on organizational change; but rather to report those factors which influenced initial resistance to change.

At the end of the last training session, the three consultants independently of each other perceived that the participants of the last group demonstrated less resis-

tance compared to other groups dealt with. This prompted a query of the participants in an effort to ascertain the basis of this perception. The following represents consensus responses to the question: *"What was done, if anything, which caused you to be less resistant, more open and receptive to the workshop?"*

Sample of Responses

a. "The letter of introduction helped — the same trainers cited in the letter were the actual trainers who delivered the workshop."

b. "The biographical information made me feel as if I already knew the trainers."

c. "You were here to greet us, ready to start, and on time."

d. "You facilitators seemed to get along well together — that cannot be hidden."

e. "You did not try to tell us how to run our organization."

f. "The enthusiasm and belief in the training by the trainers caused me to get caught up in it."

g. "The introductory get-acquainted exercise helped."

h. "The introductory letter — I was surprised to receive it."

i. "Relaxed attitude of the trainers — not stuffed shirt — here to help you — a caring attitude."

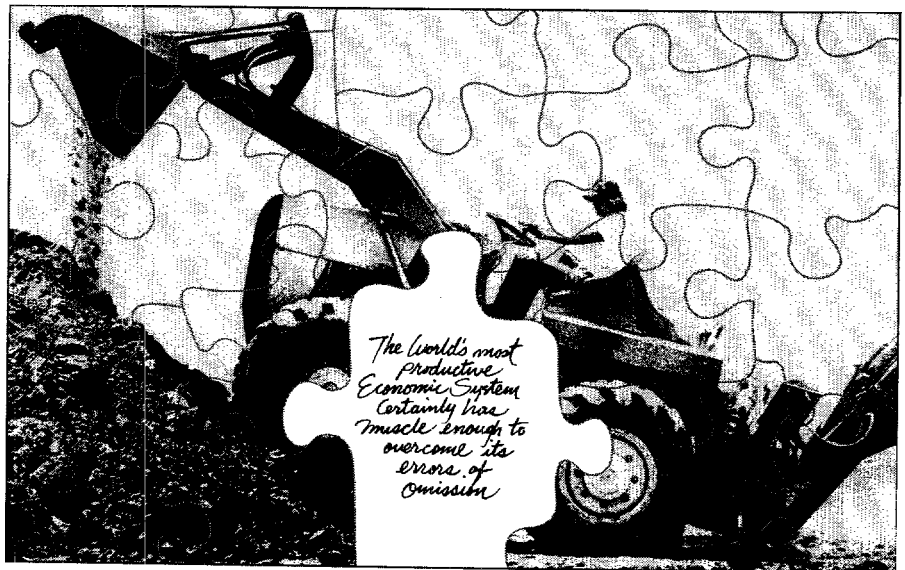
j. "The focus was on what you can do to improve your own job."

k. "The helpful introductory comments of the battalion commander who said that these aren't just some civilians here to rip us off."

l. "The trainers sat with the students and made comments just like one of the group."

m. "I like the open-systems

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model presented during the orientation. It was well explained using real world situations. Maybe we can use it in our own training."

Discussion

The responses of the participants in this project indicate that there are some deliberate actions which change agents can take in order to effectively cope with resistance to change. It is acknowledged that each consultant has a particular style; however, it seems that the principles underlying each of the above responses can be considered universal in application.

The obvious need for consultants to model individual and group behavior in relationships with client systems is inescapable. French and Bell state that consultant behavior will tend to reinforce or disconfirm learning.¹ The participants' comment that the facilitators seemed to get along well together, which cannot be hidden, is supportive of this statement. Belief in the training and enthusiastic delivery can

also be modeled with positive results.

It seems important to members of the client system to perceive that they have the choice in the decision to change. The comment that the consultants did not try to tell them how to manage their organizations supports this concept. Festinger states that if a person feels as though he has had the freedom to choose to behave differently, he is more amenable to change of attitude.²

Other responses by the participants indicate that the consultant should provide as much of an understanding of the change process and the resultant benefits as possible. This understanding is most effective when communicated in close relation to the language and value system of the client system. The difficulty of "unfreezing" is increased if the change effort of the consultant is not "sensitive" to the omnipresent perceived threat and

resultant resistance to change.

In conclusion, there is a continuing need to identify and share those specific actions which the consultant can take to effectively cope with resistance to change. Resistance does not have to be feared. It can be "overcome." *Geronimo!*

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1. French, Wendell L. and C.H. Bell, *Organizational Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
2. Festinger, L., "A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance," in *Psychology in Administration*, ed. T.W. Costello and S.S. Zalkind. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963.

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