RESISTANCE TO CHANGE:
A RE-EXAMINATION AND EXTENSION[1]

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The cliché, ''The more we learn, the less we know'' seems applicable to our current understanding of the phenomenon of resistance to organizational change. Although some authors question the value of the concept or resistance and have called for its discontinuation (Dent & Goldberg, 1999), the argument offered here is that new avenues of investigation are available by reconsidering resistance as created (constructed) in the conversations and relationships operating between agent and recipient. Beginning with an exploration of the nature of resistance from three perspectives, mechanistic, social, and conversational, resistance is reconsidered as a conversational product constructed within the relational space of agent and client. Further, just as resistance is constructed, so the change agent can choose to construct change conversations to restore a change dialogue even when it has been suffused with resistance interpretations and interactions.

THE MECHANISTIC VIEW OF RESISTANCE

As Piderit (2000) points out, much of the work on resistance to change borrows from the field of mechanics, conceptualizing resistance as a force that slows or stops motion and increases the energy and work required to alter the rate and magnitude (distance) of movement. These ideas are evident in Lewin's (1947) work on resistance in which he conceptualizes a quasi-stationary equilibrium as a dynamic balance between a field of forces driving for movement in one direction and a field of forces driving for movement in the opposite direction; movement in the equilibrium occurs only through increases and decreases in these forces.

Using the mechanistic view of resistance brings three attributes of the phenomenon into view. Considering resistance to be a natural and inherently neutral occurrence, and a product of interaction, makes available a fresh perspective in the challenge of understanding organizational resistance to change.

Resistance is Natural, an Everyday Phenomenon

In mechanics, as well as other sciences, resistance is a natural and inevitable occurrence where motion and movement are involved. There is no movement without some resistance, and, in fact, resistance is the evidence that something is moving. Mechanistic resistance slows things down, reducing momentum and velocity.

Although our habit is to think of organizational resistance as something exceptional, the naturalness of resistance in organizations is evidenced in everyday resistance (Scott, 1986, 1990). People regularly behave in ways that suggest resistance in that their behaviors can be seen to slow or delay everyday organizational proceedings. Examples of such everyday behaviors include being late for or missing meetings, forgetting, failing to perform or performing poorly, damaging equipment, not following directions, being confused and asking questions, losing or misplacing items, complaining, declining requests, harassing supervisors, etc. These behaviors can delay the accomplishment of everyday goals as well as lower efficiency and productivity.

As regular occurrences, these everyday forms of resistance are already in the fabric of organizational practices and discourses with which people are familiar and for which they have developed various accommodating responses. Indeed, people in organizations acquire reputations based on these behaviors that shape their future interactions

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with others (Gergen, 1994), for example, ‘‘Dave is always late.’’ People who have worked together for any length of time know who engages in, or is likely to engage in, each of these everyday forms of resistance. As a result, change agents, particularly internal ones, may be effective in reducing these everyday resistance-demonstrating behaviors. Where they are unable to do so, they are likely to learn to adapt, for example, by developing ‘‘work-arounds’’ or changing their own practices and conversations.

The mechanistic view shows us the ordinariness of resistance in organizations and the frequency with which we see behaviors that could reasonably be interpreted as slowing things down, reducing momentum, or delaying progress. In this regard, the mechanistic view suggests that resistance to change is itself, ordinary and natural and may, in fact, be an expression of everyday resistance.

Resistance is Neutral

In addition to being natural, mechanistic resistance is also neutral, in that it is neither good nor bad, positive nor negative, beneficial nor detrimental. Resistance is something that happens when objects come into contact or interact with each other; a speedboat moving through water, an airplane moving through air, or lungs expanding against the chest cavity. The value assigned to an occurrence of resistance, and whether one wants more or less of it, will depend on the goal, objective, or context in which it occurs. To improve health, for example, we get vaccinations to increase resistance to disease, and we suppress the immune system to reduce resistance to organ transplants. Similarly, we want to increase resistance in space heaters to obtain more heat, but reduce it in microelectronics where we want less heat. Or we increase resistance, as drag, to slow the space shuttle’s descent, and reduce it to increase the speed of race cars.

Lewin’s (1947) quasi-stationary equilibria underscore the significance of context to the value of resistance by the fact that either set of field forces can be ‘‘for’’ or ‘‘against’’ forces depending on the goal to be achieved. If, using Lewin’s example, the goal is less discrimination, then forces driving toward less discrimination are ‘‘for’’ and forces driving toward more discrimination are ‘‘against.’’ However, if the goal is more discrimination, then forces driving toward less discrimination are ‘‘against’’ and forces driving toward more discrimination are ‘‘for.’’ The normative value one attaches to the occurrence of a particular force, therefore, does not depend on the force itself, but on what one is trying to accomplish or achieve. In other words, whether a change considers a particular force resistance or not is determined by the agent’s goal, not some inherent characteristic of the force itself.

The mechanistic view of resistance reminds us that resistance, even resistance to organizational change, is not inherently a ‘‘bad’’ thing, and that the change agent assigns such values. This reminder is a useful one in that it can encourage change agents to return to the context and goals for the change rather than working to overcome, ignore, or work around behaviors that imply resistance.

Resistance is a Product of Interaction

In mechanics, resistance is a derived or calculated value that is a product of an interaction between two or more entities, for example, speedboat and water. As such, the magnitude of resistance depends on the characteristics and attributes of both elements: the boat and the water. The level of resistance encountered by the speedboat depends on the design and material composition of the boat as well as the density of the water. A slim bullet shaped boat will encounter less resistance moving through water than will a box-like craft made of the same material. Thus, although we can talk about the characteristics of an element (e.g., its density or viscosity), we

cannot say that the magnitude of resistance is entirely a function of any one element. To do so would be like saying ‘‘the design of the boat is fine, it’s the water that’s the problem.’’

The mechanistic view of resistance gives us the idea of resistance to organizational change as a product of interaction: it takes two things, two sides, two positions. It is not an attribute, either kinetic or potential, of one individual or group or of any proposal or directive. It is a result of interactions between change agents and change recipients, proposals and responses, directives and behaviors and actions.

THE SOCIAL VIEW OF RESISTANCE

Dent and Goldberg (1999) have noted that we have drifted away from the systemic and interactive nature of resistance described by Lewin, and characteristic of mechanics, to a more one-sided approach that portrays resistance as an exceptional and detrimental phenomenon that is an attribute or product of individuals and groups rather than of interactions. The social difficulty of responding effectively to resistant behaviors and communications may account for some of this shift to seeing resistance as always problematic, but it risks reducing the potential value of resistance to change agents for achieving successful organizational changes. Ford, Ford, and D’Amelio (2008), among others (e.g., Meston & King, 1996; Nord & Jermier, 1994), propose that these more social interpretations take a stance opposing the mechanistic view of resistance, treating it as unusual, damaging, and located ‘‘over there in them.’’

Resistance is Exceptional

The social view of resistance treats it as something extraordinary, that is, not an everyday occurrence, but something that happens only in response to change. Even though some ordinary forms of everyday resistance have been offered as evidence of resistance to change (e.g., Caruth, Middlebrook, & Rachel, 1985; O’Toole, 1995), it is posited that resistance to organizational change constitutes something exceptional. Is resistance to change different from everyday resistance in terms of its form, intensity, source, frequency, or duration? During a change, for example, do people complain more than they usually do, or do they change the content of their complaints?

The habitual nature of people, and the structural coupling of their interactions, suggests it is unlikely that people innovate new forms of resistance or that de novo forms of resistance arise in response to change initiatives. Rather, it is much more likely that people continue doing what they already know to do (Hedberg, Nystrom, & Starbuck, 1976). If this is the case, then resistance to change may not differ substantially from everyday resistance, at least not in the early stages of change. However, if change recipients find that their communications are not heard, recognized, or valued, for example, agents ‘‘do not listen,’’ they may escalate their behaviors by altering the form, content, timing, etc. of their responses. This response may be deployed particularly where change agents use resistance reduction strategies based on force, or coercion (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). Under such circumstances, we would expect the nature and form of resistance to change over the duration of change (Duck, 2001).

Drazin and Joyce (1979) propose three different types of resistance: inactive, misdirected, and oppositional. Within this typology, inactive and misdirected resistance result largely from existing and habitual ways of operating, that is, they are everyday forms of resistance. Oppositional resistance, however, is something different and exceptional. Unfortunately, because research has not focused on the difference between everyday resistance and exceptional resistance, it is not known what proportion of resistance to organizational change falls into each of these three categories, or in what ways ordinary resistance differs from exceptional resistance.

The social view of resistance brings in the idea of different kinds of resistance, not only varying by degree, but also the possibility of exceptional or oppositional resistance, that is, something beyond everyday or ordinary. It may indeed be worthy of further research to determine the types of interactions that tend to shift ordinary resistance to a more oppositional type, and the types of interactions that might be applied to increase the change agents' capacity for hearing, recognizing, and valuing the communications of change recipients, thus restoring oppositional resistance to its more ordinary nature.

Resistance is Detrimental

In the social view, resistance has come to have a distinctly pejorative meaning (Nord & Jermier, 1994) and is reliably considered as detrimental to the success of a change. This is despite research showing resistance to be beneficial (e.g., Nemeth, Brown, & Rogers, 2001; Nemeth, Connell, Rogers, & Brown, 2001; Schulz-Hardt, Jochims, & Frey, 2002) and with arguments regarding its role as an asset to the accomplishment of change (Ford et al., 2008). In his hypothetical example of a work group, Lewin (1952) illustrates the beneficial value of resistance. The group maintained its level of production despite the absence of a team member or the supply of inferior material. Lewin states, ''If, in spite of such changes in group life setting, production is kept at the same level, then one can speak of 'resistance' to change the rate of production,'' recognizing that resistance is a factor in successful performance.

Implicit in the social view of resistance as detrimental is the assumption that all changes are beneficial and should be implemented as planned. Further, the change agent is presumed to be producing greater alignment or fit between an organization and its environment that will improve some aspect of performance. Change agents, however, are susceptible to the same bounded rationality, decision biases, and social dynamics that confront all decision makers (e.g., Bazerman, 2002; March, 1994). As a consequence, agents can fall victim to the planning fallacy, a form of optimism in which benefits are overestimated, potential mistakes and miscalculations are overlooked, resources and capabilities overestimated, and the time required for implementation underestimated (Buehler, 1994; Lovallo & Kahneman, 2003).

Agents are also susceptible to three other human tendencies: the illusion of invulnerability, in which it is assumed that bad things are more likely to happen to others than ourselves (Levine, 2003); the better-than-average effect, in which our traits, behaviors, and prospects are evaluated more favorably than those of others (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vrenderburg, 1995); and the tendency to attribute successful outcomes to factors under our control rather than to luck or the actions of others. Unrealistic optimism regarding the likelihood and ease of success can be difficult to eliminate even in the face of factual evidence to the contrary (Buehler, 1994; Lovallo & Kahneman, 2003), and can be compounded by pressures toward group conformity (Janis, 1972). Such optimism is likely to increase where agent reputations and careers are at stake. As a result of these normal social dynamics, the confidence that change agents place in the appropriateness of the change, its benefits, and its likely success may be misplaced or unwarranted.

The difficulty is that organization changes, particularly large-scale complex ones, are subject to myriad problems that are beyond the ability of human imagination to envision in advance of the change implementation process (Lovallo & Kahneman, 2003). As a result, there are things unknown to change agents, but which may be known to change recipients, that become evident once the change is underway. Change agents caught in the grip of unrealistic optimism may engage in defensive speaking and listening (Schutz & Baumeister, 1999), in which they

discount or deny the significance of certain change recipient behaviors and communications, dismissing them as resistance, and thus detrimental.

Resistance may be considered detrimental by virtue of being irrational if we assume that agents and recipients have equal access to a common reality or equal ability to deal with it (Watzlawick, 1990). Against this background, behaviors and communications that appear to be resistant must reflect a lack of information, misunderstandings, or individual characteristics that compromise one's ability to deal with reality as it is, that is, recipients are uninformed or irrational. Treating resistance as ''irrational'' presumes it violates normative standards of decision making and is the result of unthoughtful, unconsidered, and uninformed choices between acceptance/compliance and resistance (Brunsson, 1986). Research has found, however, that change recipients who are considered by change agents to be resistant do not consider themselves resistant, or engaged in resistance, but rather that they are supporting the organization's goals, indicating that resistance may be rational. It just may not be what agents want or expect, especially where the change recipients' responses might lead to delays, add to costs, increase the effort required, or increase the uncertainty of success (Ansoff, 1988).

Resistance, therefore, may be deemed detrimental because it is socially difficult to deal with objections, disagreements, or other negative-sounding behaviors and communications, however much they might ultimately contribute to the understanding and implementation of organization change. The fallacies of optimism and invulnerability may preclude change agents from recognizing that their plans for change must include interactions with change recipients to gain insight into unanticipated aspects of the change, and that these interactions may, in some instances, require changes in the plan's content and timeline. Few changes can proceed in lockstep with the plan; most require including recipient input and feedback to make course-correcting adjustments as the change proceeds. Accordingly, behaviors labeled resistant are in fact necessary for effective engagement and implementation.

Resistance is ''Over There, In Them/It''

Contrary to treating resistance as a product of interactions, the social view treats it as a personal property located ''over there, in them/it''1 (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Ford et al., 2008). Nord and Jermier (1994) trace the genesis of this perspective to the early human relations publications where they claim Mayo's researchers adopted a clinical and therapeutic orientation to the interview program conducted at the Western Electric Company. This approach led the researchers to discount participant comments that were critical of the company and its supervisors, attributing them to individual ''maladjustment.'' Although Mayo acknowledged that the basis of this maladjustment could be found in the relationships among workers, their work, and company policy, he focused his explanations for resistance on workers' physical and mental problems, preoccupation with personal situations, obsession and other personality disorders, distortion and exaggeration, irrational thinking, and poor communication. In short, Mayo ignored the interactive nature of resistance, even though he recognized its existence, and he chose to locate resistance ''in'' the workers, as an internal state or tendency.

A similar focus is evident in the landmark study by Coch and French (1948) where understandings of and explanations for worker resistance were taken from the point of view of factory management. Although the researchers acknowledged the potential role of supervisor and management practices and communications in worker responses such as resentment and distrust, they nevertheless focused their explanations for resistance on individual and group attributes.

The legacy of these studies is the ease with which change agents overlook the interactive nature of resistance and consider it to be a personal property of the people who are recipients of the organizational change. This misconception is bolstered by ongoing work that treats resistance as a product, whether intentional or not, of the change recipients' cognitive state, affective state, behavioral response, or some combination of these (e.g., Argyris, 1990; Ashforth &Mael, 1998; Piderit, 2000; Zander, 1950). Piderit's (2000) successful integration of these various views into a multidimensional construct further reinforces resistance as a personal property rather than a product of interactions.

The error of locating resistance ''over there, in them/it'' is that there is no resistance independent of movement or pressure. Resistance requires a pairing, an interaction, and a relationship, as between boat and water, object and environment, or change agent and change recipient. Ford et al., propose including agents as a contributing factor in the occurrence of resistance to create the interactive phenomena that are able to give rise to what we see as resistance. Change agent behavior and communications are a part of the resistance-producing interactions at least in part because agents can and do break agreements (Rousseau, 1995, 1996, 1998), fail to restore losses of trust and credibility (Andersson, 1996; Cobb, Wooten, & Folger, 1995; Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997), fail to legitimize change, misrepresent its costs and benefits, fail to use the appropriate conversations, and are ambivalent (Larson & Tompkins, 2005). These missteps associated with change and change agents can contribute to recipients' perceptions of injustice and betrayal (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999), inoculating them and increasing their immunity to change (McGuire, 1964; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961).

The social view of resistance as a personal phenomenon located in individuals and groups independent of change agent behaviors and communications, limits the opportunities for opening communication to include the contributions of seemingly resistant responses. Remembering that resistance is an interactive phenomenon enables change agents to make adjustments in plans, forums, and messages that will deepen the quality of interaction and gain valuable intelligence for effective change.

THE CONVERSATIONAL VIEW OF RESISTANCE

As Boden (1994, p. 14) points out, ''when people talk, they are simultaneously and reflexively talking their relationships, organizations, and whole institutions into action, or into 'being' ''. It is through the timing, placing, pacing, and patterning of these conversations that participants weave and reweave the threads of foreground and background conversations, creating an inter-textual tapestry that constitutes an organization as a real and practical place (Boden, 1994; Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996; Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002). These conversations establish the context in which people act and the content and processes through which things get done (Berquist, 1993; Schrage, 1989).

Conversations and Change

The mechanistic view of resistance is based on an objective view of objects and reality in which reports of resistance mirror reality. The social view is based on a subjective and psychological view of subjects individually and in groups in which resistance is a personal property or tendency. Organizations, however, and the changes that occur within them, exist in meta-conversations (Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004) constituted in and by networks of simultaneous, sequential, and recursive conversations that unfold over different times in and through the everyday, moment-to-moment, interaction-by-interaction, talk of participants (Boden, 1994; Eccles, Nohria, & Berley, 1992; Winograd & Flores, 1987).

In organizations so constituted, change is appropriately seen as a polyphonic phenomenon within which conversations are introduced, maintained, and deleted (Albert, 1983, 1984; Czarniawska, 1997; Ford, 1999). Organizational participants do not all speak the same language, nor do the same words everywhere mean the same thing. Rather, participants reside within different language communities, engage in different language games (Mauws & Phillips, 1995; Wittgenstein, 1958), and read texts in different ways, giving them life and energy by translating them into their own languages (Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996). Such translation, however, is neither straightforward nor evident. Truth and falsehood does not reside in the agreement among language games, but in whether the world revealed by a particular language game passes or fails the truth tests associated with that language game. To say, for example, that magic is false because it does not conform to the canons of science is to confuse a language game of magic with a language game of science.

Change agents, therefore, cannot communicate presuming that there is a single world to which everyone has access, or a common descriptive language that mirrors that world. Nor can they presume that words are conduits that contain the parameters of change such that their transmission gets the message across (Reddy, 1979). Change agents cannot hold other language games accountable to the truth tests of their own language game, expecting to dominate them in some kind of hegemonic discourse. Rather, change agents and change recipients must work to construct communication and understanding, dealing with the issues of translation and retranslation that result from differences in distinctions (and meanings) associated with different language communities and language games as evidenced in the studies by Czarniawska (1997) and Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar (1995).

Resistance: The Construction of a Distinction

When we say that something ‘‘is A,’’ we draw a boundary of ‘‘not’’ (Smith, 1984) between that which we say ‘‘is A’’ (e.g., resistance) and that which we say ‘‘is not A’’ (e.g., acceptance, compliance, agreement, etc.). In other words, we make a distinction. Distinctions are like categories or fields that bracket event flows (Weick, 1995) and into which an ever-changing array of actions and events can be assigned, not because those actions match or mirror reality, but because, for the observer, they ‘‘fit’’ the distinction (von Foester, 1984). The distinguished phenomena are the result of sense making and reality construction and reside not in the world, but in the nature of distinctions themselves.

What we see, and what we hear, we see and hear by virtue of the distinctions that constitute us and the language communities and language games in which we reside. It is because distinctions operate in this way that so many different specific recipient actions and communications can be considered resistance by change agents and why what is considered resistance in one context or by one agent is not in another.

Resistance, therefore, is not a factual, descriptive report that mirrors reality, something that exists in its own right independent of an observer, but rather it is a distinction in language that creates the possibility of the observer ‘‘observing’’ a phenomenon in the world they call resistance. Whether a change recipient’s response is labeled resistance will be the result of a comparison, a categorization, and an abstracting (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990) that is dependent on a ‘‘particular point of view, namely, what is being considered, and with respect to what sameness is demanded’’ (Glaserfeld, 1984, p. 36).

If we want to understand why some actions are classified as resistance and others not, we want to consider the way the distinction resistance exists for agents and how it informs their classification of recipient actions and communications. This shifts the question of interest from ‘‘Why do they (recipients) resist?’’ to ‘‘Why do they

(agents) call that resistance?’’ In this question, agents become active and interested participants in the construction of what they call resistance.

A Construct of Assertions and Declarations

All conversations are comprised of speech acts (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985); actions in language that bring into existence a reality that did not exist before their utterance. Searle (1969, 1975) classifies all speech acts into five categories: expressives, directives, commissives, assertives, and declaratives. Expressives bring forth an affective or attitudinal state, for example, ‘‘I’m worried.’’ Directives (requests) ask the listener to do something, whereas, commissives (promises) commit the speaker to do something. Assertives are statements about the world, for example, ‘‘This project is behind schedule,’’ that are supported by validating evidence that can be challenged. Because assertions are based on evidence, they are always about the past or are extrapolations of the past (Scherr, 1989). Declarations are not statements about the world, but create a new state or condition in the world solely by their having been said. When a parent names a child ‘‘Kyle,’’ he is so named; when a judge declares a defendant ‘‘guilty,’’ he is guilty; and when the CEO appoints a manager ‘‘Vice President,’’ she is appointed. The future reality into which they and everyone else lives, is the one given by the declaration. Unlike assertions, declarations are not based in evidence, but gain adherence based on the position of the person making the declaration.

Resistance is brought into existence through assertion and declaration. It exists, in organization change, because someone says it exists and not before. When change agents report that change recipients are resistant, they are asserting that specific actions and communications by the change recipients are evidence of resistance. This assertion is based on the change agent’s resistance distinction, that is, what he or she understands resistance to be. Asserting resistance is giving an interpretation to specific actions and communications and is not an actual report or description of the action or communication itself.

When a change agent says there is resistance to an organizational change, that assertion or declaration turns some behaviors and communications into resistant ones. Just as a minister says, ‘‘I now pronounce you man and wife,’’ a change agent who says ‘‘They are resisting’’ is also making a pronouncement. This speech act brings the whole world of resistance into the present situation, changing the way in which the change agent and change recipients interact, and altering the course of the change.

Whether we see resistance as constructed by an assertion or by a declaration, in the conversational view of resistance, the fact remains that when change recipients are labeled ‘‘resistant,’’ they will be related to in a different way in the future than if they are labeled ‘‘compliant,’’ ‘‘cooperative,’’ or ‘‘supportive.’’ The interpretation of the change agent, by being an active partner in the construction of resistance or cooperation, affects the quality and effectiveness of the communications intended to bring about change.

RESISTANCE AS A PRODUCT OF RELATIONSHIP

Resistance takes two, and occurs as a product of an encounter between two objects, a subject and an object, or two subjects. Resistance to organizational change is a product of the encounter between a change agent and the change recipients. Investigating the nature of the agent–recipient relationship can suggest why agents see resistance as exceptional, detrimental, and an attribute of an individual or group.

Four Types of Relations

Fiske (1991, 1992) proposes four basic types of relationships that structure social interactions regardless of their substance or surface form: communal sharing (CS), authority ranking (AR), equality matching (EM), and market pricing (MP). According to Fiske, social life is ''a process of seeking, making, sustaining, repairing, adjusting, judging, construing, and sanctioning relationships'' which people feel committed to, obligated to abide by, and attempt to impose on others. People interact with each other to construct, participate in, and maintain a variety of relationships using combinations of these four structures. Behaviors and communications that are socially significant in one structure are not in others, suggesting that each type operates like a language game. Within each structure, people attend to different aspects of interactions, and different individual behaviors and communications are meaningful or irrelevant for participants' evaluative judgments of any interaction. According to Fiske, these four relational forms ''are the basic schemata for constituting and structuring groups, and for the formation of social identity and the relational self.'' Considering these relational models, then, can provide another perspective on organizational change and the occurrence of resistance as a relational product of agent–recipient interactions.

CS is a relational framework in which the foundation for participant interaction is that everyone is socially equivalent in the situation, for example, ''We all love jazz,'' or ''We are graduates of this university's College of Engineering.'' In the CS relational model, participants focus on what they have in common and disregard or minimize what makes them different or unique. This way of relating is specific to a particular situation or issue, for example, a jazz concert or a college reunion, and because the issue at hand can change, the grounds of commonality or equivalence can also change. Participants who are ''all the same'' in one context may not be in another. We may all be fans on game day, but when we are back in class, we are faculty and students. Interactions in a CS environment entail generosity and respect for members, and an obligation to share with others in the community who ask for support or resources. People working on a project team characterized by CS ways of relating will be likely to pitch in and cheer for the team or do the job at hand without keeping track of whether others are giving more or less than they are.

AR is a more hierarchical structure of relating, where the member rankings are known to all, and are ordered from ''low'' to ''high'' along some social dimension such as age, level of education, power, authority, or income. In an AR environment, the salient feature is the relative positions of the group members, that is, who is ''above'' or ''below'' whom. People higher in rank have more prestige, prerogatives, and privileges than those lower in rank, and the protocols of AR interactions require each person or group to be related to according to their stature and position in the group or organization. People on a project team characterized by AR relations may be less likely to take independent initiative without authorization from the project leader, taking responsibility when it has been delegated through AR channels.

EM is a relational model based on the observation of balance and one-for- one correspondence in interactions, such as is found in ''turn taking, egalitarian distributive justice, in-kind reciprocity, tit-for-tat retaliation, eye-for-an-eye revenge, or compensation by equal replacement'' (Fiske, 1992). In EM relationships, the primary concern is that each person in the relationship environment is entitled to the same amount as every other person and that imbalances are significant and must be addressed. As a result, people count and compare to identify any imbalances and determine the direction and magnitude of any favoritism or neglect. In a project team characterized by EM relations, team members keep track of favors done, assistance granted, or burdens borne to the benefit of others inside and outside the group, and expect their good works to be reciprocated at some time in the future.

MP relational structures are based on member observations of proportionality, where participants attend to ratios and rates, for example, cost– benefit and input–output ratios. In the MP relational environment, people engage in a calculus that reduces all potentially relevant components and features under consideration to a single value or utility metric, allowing them to compare many qualitatively and quantitatively diverse factors. Thus, for example, one participant can say, ''A massage, a CD, and two bottles of homemade wine are worth more than either the six Marvel comic books, the DVD, and the picture of Einstein combined or the $15.'' In a project team characterized by MP relations, the value of member contributions to the project goals and results will be calculated and compared to establish how each person stands in proportion to the value of others.

Fiske maintains that relations between individuals and groups are rarely constituted by any one of these forms alone. Most relationships are characterized by interactions of two or more types, with different forms used in different phases of an interaction, with different subjects or issues, or when new elements are introduced, for example, strangers or other changes. Nevertheless, Fiske proposes that as a first approximation, the overall structure of a relationship can be described in terms of one predominant model.

Varieties of Relational Resistance

The relational structures proposed by Fiske offer a way to understand the interactional dynamics among change agents and change recipients such that what agents consider to be resistance is a function of the relational structure in which they are located. Since each structure provides a context for what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior, resistance could be ascribed to any behavior or communication that is perceived to ''break the rules'' of that relational type. In this respect, relational structures provide a context of understandings and agreements, the violation of which is akin to the breaching of psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1995) and patterns of cooperation (Axelrod, 1984, 1997).

Considering only one predominant relational model for any pairing of change agent and change recipients, the most obvious occasion for relationally inappropriate actions to arise is when agents and recipients are interacting based on different relational structures. When, for example, an outside change agent (e.g., a consultant) is engaged to facilitate a change initiative, there is a possibility of different expectations associated with different relational backgrounds resulting in attribution of resistance to unfamiliar or unexpected behaviors or communications. A change agent operating with CS practices and expectations could perceive, for example, that change recipients operating from EM who are raising issues of past favors done and future favors owed are being resistant because they are self-interested rather than they have and are expressing different relational habits than are entirely natural to them.

A change agent operating with CS communications and behaviors will encounter a different type of response from change recipients who are operating from an AR, EM, or MP background. The AR recipients may appear to the change agent to be lacking initiative, refusing to make decisions, or slow to offer ideas, when, in fact, they are reflecting their deference to the AR of the change agent or other members in the recipient group. The EM recipients can seem to a change agent to be giving too much attention to comparing the benefits and workloads of their group's role in the change process to those of other groups, but they are operating consistently with their commitment to having everyone contribute to and gain equally from the change initiative. The MP recipients may appear to be focusing more on results than on tasks or giving attention to subjects outside the interests of the change agent, but that is their way operating to establish the worth of various strategies, actions, or outcomes and to be sure that things are done proportionately.

A change agent with expectations of an AR relationship with change recipients will similarly be surprised with responses from recipients who interrelate based on the principles of other structures. The AR change agent may interpret CS recipients as demonstrating resistance when they ignore clear hierarchical differences by behaving too informally with their superiors, questioning the strategies and tactics proposed by the change agent, or protesting the assignment of authority or responsibility to people who see themselves as members of a group of equals. An AR change agent may also misunderstand the responses of participants operating with EM protocols, seeing demands for equal work assignments and privileges as a demonstration of resistance and disrespectful of authority. AR change agents can also interpret resistance when MP recipients appear to be second guessing the change agent's direction by recalculating the worth of certain plans, assignments, or metrics.

Change agents who have an EM structure for relating are likely to see the casual and personal relationships of CS recipients as disorganized and unfocused, because they fail to address the importance of equal work and equal rewards for all. EM agents may label the behaviors and communications of AR recipients as resistant because they appear too rigid and structured for a smooth and collaborative change process. The EM agent can also find MP recipient calculations and comparisons of value to be a distraction from the business of sharing the work and maintaining a balance among groups.

The change agent who bases his or her relational skills in the MP framework is likely to see CS, AR, and EM recipients as resisting by virtue of having another agenda or failing to keep an eye on the goals and the most efficient ways to achieve them. MP agents will tend to see CS recipients as people operating for a social agenda rather than a work-related one, AR recipients as either aggressive or passive depending on their hierarchical positions, and EM recipients as childishly worrying about getting their fair share rather than producing results.

Even when the change agents and change recipients are operating in the same relational structure, change agents are still likely to interpret resistance whenever the rules of the relational language game are threatened or violated. In a CS environment, the change agent can construe as resistance community threatening responses such as, ''Why do some people have to work overtime to get this done while others do not?'' or, ''Our group is bearing the brunt of these changes and inconveniences.'' When changes agents and recipients are operating in an AR framework, the change agent may interpret as resistance such authority-questioning responses as, ''Who authorized this project and why do they think it is important?'' or ''Why do we need to do this now?'' In an EM structure, change agents may hear as resistance such equity-violating responses as, ''We should get more resources than other groups because we are going to be doing a more analytic type of work than they are.'' When MP relations prevail, change agents may interpret resistance if they hear market threatening responses such as, ''The people who have been here the longest should take leadership positions and the IT specialists should get special bonuses because they are required to support every project team.''

Finally, since most relationships are constituted by a combination of the four relational structures, change recipients may be confused as to which relational structure applies when change is introduced. For example, even though the primary background structure between agent and recipient may be AR, agents and recipients may operate more on a day-to-day basis in EM. As a result, there may be more informality, more questioning of directives, and more attention to giving and getting favors than would be true in a pure AR structure. If, under these conditions, the change agent attempts to initiate change based on AR, recipients may respond as if it is still EM prompting the agent to consider recipient responses inappropriately compliant and respectful and label them as resistance. Accordingly, what is considered resistance in one relational structure would not be in another and

whether a particular behavior is considered resistance would depend on the relational structure in which it occurred, not the behavior itself.

Change agents assert or declare the existence of resistance in an organizational change based on their expectations and interpretations of responses from change recipients. The relational structures and protocols presumed to be operative on the part of either agents or recipients can contribute to misinterpretations of ordinary and non-harmful responses as resistance. The slowdown of progress in a change initiative that is attributed to ''resistance to change'' may in fact be due to the misinterpretation of everyday responses as resistance, and the resulting attention that is given to perceived resistance by the change agent.

THE CONVERSATIONAL AND RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF RESISTANCE AND CHANGE

People have a variety of natural, everyday ways of relating and responding to people and events, and participating in organizational conversations. These can be seen as agent and recipient expressions and interactions within language games or relational structures, or as networks of interacts and double-interacts (Weick, 1979). By themselves, these interactions do not constitute resistance until the first-order objective reality of the interaction is collapsed by a change agent's second-order interpretive reality into a net presentation (Bohm, 1996), in which the agent's interpretation of resistance is treated as factual. As the effects of these collapsed realities are subsequently brought into conversation and discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Ford, 1999), they alter the change dialogue by bringing in more elements related to the interpretation of resistance.

The Change Dialogue

First-order reality is the term Watzlawick (1976) uses for the physically demonstrable and publicly discernible characteristics, qualities, or attributes of a thing, event, or situation. Similar to Senge's (1990) events, Bohm's (1996) presented reality, and Searle's (1995) brute facts, first-order reality pertains to the facticity of things or events, that is, data that is empirically verifiable, and is spoken in an ''object language'' which is as nearly descriptive as possible (Hampden-Turner, 1981). As Bateson (1979, p. 90) points out

> a pure description would include all the facts (i.e., all the effective differences) immanent in the phenomena to be described but would indicate no kind of connection among these phenomena that would make them more understandable.

First-order realities are thus considered ''objective'' in the sense that they are without interpretation or meaning, although they are not presumed to be isomorphic to or mirror some ''true'' or ''absolute'' reality. Nonetheless, in first-order realities, rocks are just rocks.

In a dialogue between change agents and change recipients, the first-order reality includes an objective description of the things people say, the behavior they exhibit, and the observable results, events, or changes that are produced or arise in the process of the dialogue. Such a description would include specifications of the interacts, in which people say things to others, and the double-interacts, in which the behavior of individual A (e.g., agent) elicits a response from individual B (e.g., recipient) which in turn serves as a stimulus that prompts a response from individual A, and so on (Weick, 1979). A first-order report on the change dialogue could be a transcript of who said and did what, and when.

Second-order realities are created by giving meaning and significance, rendering interpretations and explanations, or coming to conclusions based on a first-order reality (Bohm, 1996; Watzlawick, 1976), that is, through sense

making (Argyris, 1990; Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, & Kleiner, 1994; Weick, 1995). Unlike the object language of a first-order reality, second-order reality is spoken in a meta-language of abstractions (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990) and metaphor that is ''about'' the first-order reality (Hampden-Turner, 1981) but is not objectively observable in the facts or data of a first-order reality. Second-order reality is created and constructed by observer opinions, judgments, assessments, evaluations, and accounts (Harre´ , 1980). In second-order realities, rocks are weapons, fences, or territorial markers.

In a change initiative, the dialogue between change agent and change recipient will inevitably come to reflect the interpretations and meanings created by all participants. Creating second-order realities is a natural and normal human capacity. It is also natural and normal, having created meanings, judgments, and interpretations, to add these subjective elements into the first-order picture of reality. Unfortunately, rather than simply give a richer understanding of ''what's really going on,'' this collapse of realities can change the conversations and responses in the original dialogue in a way that is detrimental to the change initiative. Although first-order and second order realities are different logical types (Bateson, 1979; Hampden-Turner, 1981) and constitute different language games (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Mauws & Phillips, 1995; Wittgenstein, 1958), they can become fused or collapsed into a net presentation (Bohm, 1996), occurring as one, seamless reality. When the conversations associated with the resultant net presentation are suffused with interpretations of resistance, opposition, disrespect, or mistrust, the change dialogue can lose direction, momentum, and perceived value.

When people relate to expressed opinions, evaluations, judgments, and assessments as if they are factual elements of the events themselves, the conversations for and about the change will also change to incorporate the new input. The change agent, as the participant in the change dialogue who is accountable for the conduct of the dialogue and the implementation of the change, is also responsible for keeping the change on track, for example, avoiding either the dilution of the process or straying too far from the dialogue's intent. If a proposal to implement unified operating practices for a group of formerly independent regional offices devolves into a discussion about seniority, compensation, and company cars, the change agent can declare resistance, and digress into dealing with it, or recognize the need to restore the change dialogue and table tangential issues for future discussion.

The choice of declaring resistance or restoring the change dialogue is in the hands of the change agent. For example, the change agent who observes that change recipients are hesitant to volunteer, passively waiting to be told what to do, or critical of the distribution of work and rewards, may choose to interpret that they are resistant, or that they are simply responding consistent with the rules of the language game to which they are accustomed. When agents observe behaviors and communications in the double-interacts of a change dialogue are collapsing realities of factual interactions and perceptions of resistance, they can choose to conduct a ''resistance conversation'' in which they focus on overcoming or resolving the apparent resistance, or a more change-oriented one in which they focus on the change itself, allowing the resistance to be.

The Construction of Resistance

''Resistance'' enters a change dialogue when the change agent asserts or declares that certain behaviors and communications in a change dialogue constitute resistance. Until that time, the natural participation in organizational change conversations is not a problem, and all behaviors and communications are included in the discussion of the change and its implementation. When the change agent interprets and asserts/declares that some behaviors and communications are evidence of resistance on the part of change recipients, the conversations are no longer a natural, neutral set of interactions. Rather, conversations based on a collapsed reality of facts and interpretations of resistance will precipitate a course of action, for example, resistance

reduction, which continues until the agent asserts or declares s/he has successfully dealt with or overcome the ''resistance.''

A resistance conversation for reducing or eliminating the perceived sources of resistance thus displaces the change dialogue as if resistance must be removed or eliminated before change can continue. But conversations are not objects. Objects cannot physically occupy the same space at the same time. For one object to replace a second object, the second object must first be removed (Ford & Ford, 1994). Multiple conversations, however, can exist at the same time in the same space making the removal of one unnecessary for the other to exist. Just as approach–avoidance theory tells us that people can be simultaneously attracted to and repelled by change (Knowles & Linn, 2004), so too is it possible for people to speak in a way agents consider resistance while taking actions supportive of the change.

A resistance dialogue is a cycle of double-interacts that can become progressively farther removed from the original change proposition. For example, change recipients who make recommendations to alter the proposed steps or timelines of a change initiative may prompt the change agent to suspect resistance. If, in subsequent interactions, recipients request resources that are outside the original change plan, the change agent may become confident that recipients are resisting the change and decide to ''meet them halfway,'' perhaps making some changes in the timeline, and a small increase in resources. The change dialogue has now become a resistance dialogue, and will continue in that cycle until all the ''resistant'' behaviors and communications have been resolved or reach a steady state. In the course of the resistance dialogue, it is possible (even likely) that a more oppositional type of response may arise, and compromises and defensive or protective interactions increase in a manner similar to the escalation of commitment (Staw, 1981).

The cycle of resistance is a cycle of miscommunication for which agent and recipient are likely to blame each other while denying any responsibility. The agent interprets and adds meaning to recipient behaviors, altering their communications to ''fix'' or overcome the perceived resistance. The recipients, now being treated in a non-normal, non-neutral way, alter their behaviors and communications to accommodate or protest being ''fixed'' or marginalized. The resistance dialogue aggravates non-neutral responses from all participants in the cycle, and leaves the context and goals of the original change either of secondary importance or altogether unattended. As a result, conversations and actions for overcoming resistance displace those of producing the change, slowing and potentially destroying the likelihood of success.

The Construction of Change

Avoiding or breaking away from the resistance dialogue requires one party to change the meanings assigned to the actions and communications of the other (Watzlawick, 1990). Such a change is reflected in the statement, ''The way I saw the situation, those responses were a problem; now I see it differently, and that is not a problem anymore.'' The claims in this statement refer to both realities of change: the first-order reality of the situation and what is actually being said and done, and the second-order reality of assigned meaning, interpretation, and perception. The first-order reality remains unchanged, allowing the responses that triggered the agent's resistance interpretation to be recognized as having, in reality, happened. The second order reality is changed, however, with the change agent declaring that the triggering responses were not in fact a signal of resistance, but simply normal and neutral responses in the process of a change dialogue.

The change agent who is able to break away from the cycle of resistance interacts and double-interacts is able to recognize that there are two realities, factual and interpreted, see that they have been collapsed, and separate

fact from interpretation to generate a new second-order reality that reframes and reinterprets the facts. The result is a new and intentionally created reality that provides an opportunity for actions and communications to focus on successful outcomes of the change process. Rather than being a ''victim'' to an unintentionally collapsed reality, the change agent becomes responsible for creating interpretations and points of view that return the dialogue to one that is change-oriented, includes all points of view, and accepts the necessity of clarifying goals, strategies, tactics, and barriers in a conversation between change agents and change recipients.

The criteria for what constitutes ''effective change'' or ''slowing things down'' is relative to the point of view taken, not an agreed formula or standard. The agent is responsible for steering the change dialogue to a successful implementation. This is also a responsibility for recognizing the constructed nature of resistance, that is, that it is a product of agent declaration or assertion. Resistance to change is subject to the interpretations and expectations of agents, some of which are overly optimistic. What constitutes ''resistance'' in one context does not in another.

Internal change agents may have a greater challenge in staying the course of a change dialogue. They have existing relationships and relational futures (Gergen, 1994) with recipients that affect the way agents interact with recipients and their actions and communications around change. Internal agents may already have some idea of how particular recipients are likely to act in response to change and may have a predetermined interpretation of ''resistance.'' As a result, they may not recognize that certain change recipient responses that are ordinary in their organization can contribute to a slowdown or derailment of the change dialogue.

Persistent and high levels of some everyday behaviors and communications, such as lateness, poor performance, or complaining suggest that managers are either ineffective in dealing with them on a day-to-day basis or that there is tacit or resigned acceptance and accommodation of their occurrence. Internal change agents may ordinarily ''put up with'' potentially counterproductive behaviors because they are uncertain about how to deal with them, unwilling to expend the social capital necessary to change the behaviors, that is, ''it's not worth it,'' or accept it as part of the culture and the way things work around here. Because these everyday occurrences are part of the relationship, internal agents may find it difficult to deal with them during change without invoking some external justification, such as the importance of the change itself.

Agents who are aware that ''resistance'' is co-authored in their relational interactions can be responsible for the way they interpret the actions and communications of recipients. Reinforcing the importance and value of the change, and pointing to it as an opportunity to update, upgrade, or otherwise improve extant organizational habits may give the internal agent a pretext to notice and correct everyday actions that will not support meeting the change goals. Similarly, agents can adjust interpretations to avoid diluting the change dialogue with resistance conversations. Ford et al. (2008), for example, propose that agents can interpret potentially detrimental recipient comments and criticisms as counteroffers rather than declines, and use them to better develop the change plans and methods of implementation.

Responsibility for ''resistance'' goes beyond simply owning ones interpretations and reframing them in the context of the change goals. Restoring the primacy of the goals for change will, of necessity, require adjustments in change plans and timelines, and perhaps the goals as well. For a change agent, whether internal or external, this process of conversation and relationship goes beyond simply accepting responsibility for one's own interpretations to deliberately choosing to establish and sustain conversations to meet the objectives of change. The agent can either construct conversations and relationships based on interpretations of resistance, or construct change conversations and relationships based on the value of the change goals and the input of all participants as a contribution to the success of the change. This choice, which is shown in Fig. 1, belongs to the change agent.

Constructing a resistance dialogue may be the default option for a change dialogue's devolution over time, but it is not the only option.

Given the framework developed here, there is a need for research that addresses the difference(s) between everyday resistance behaviors and the actions and communications agents call ''resistance'' during change. Where there are no differences, the issue of interest is why agents call something that happens on a regular basis, and which they have previously accepted as part of the normal course of organizational interactions, ''resistance'' to change and blame it for any difficulties they encounter in the change process. Of potentially greater interest are those cases where the actions and communications agents call ''resistance'' is significantly different from everyday resistance. Such occurrences indicate that change recipients innovate new responses, which raises interesting questions of why and how?

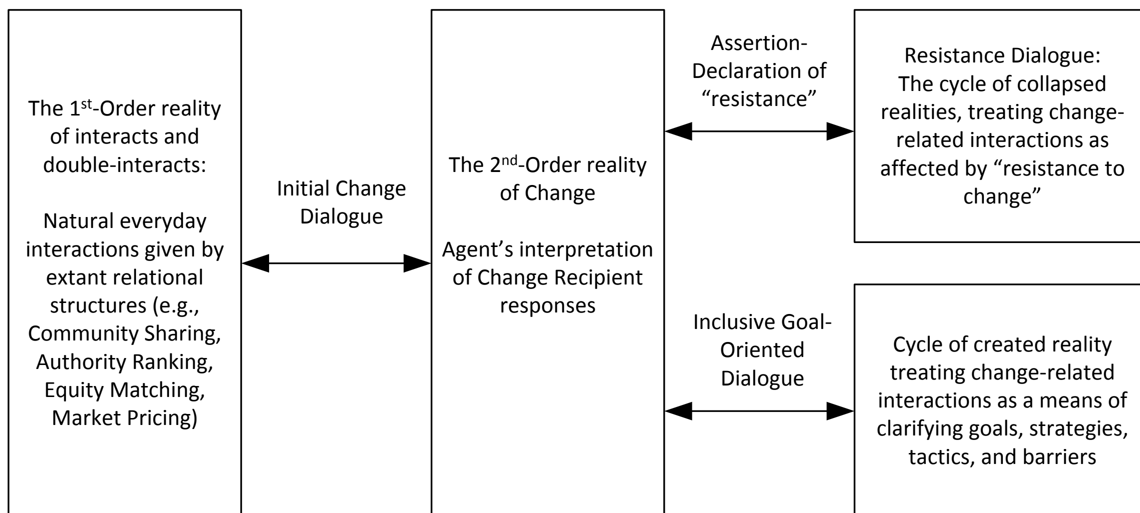

Fig. 1. The Change Agent's Choice of Dialogue.

Similarly, there is a need for research into the role of relationships in the construction of resistance and change. The work by Fiske suggests that the actions and communications agents call ''resistance'' will be a function of the relational forms that constitute their relationship with recipients, particularly the predominant relational form. Since, as Fiske notes, no relationship is constituted exclusively by one relational form, ''resistance'' may occur when participants are confused about which relational form applies to a particular interaction or set of interactions. For example, in what ways are the actions and communications that constitute ''resistance'' in one relational form different from those in other forms? Is ''resistance'' more frequent where there is relational confusion and how can such confusion be reduced or eliminated?

The mechanistic characteristics of resistance, however useful as a model, eventually transmutes into a phenomenon with the characteristics of social resistance: problematic, detrimental, and blame-worthy. The inclusion of human reactions and interpretations, added to a general lack of rigor in conversational conduct and little awareness of the power of relationship in constructing either resistance or change, could lend a gloomy outlook to the future success of organizational change initiatives. But if we take the best of the mechanistic view of resistance, that it is natural, neutral, and the product of interactions, that is, conversations and relationships, the outlook becomes brighter. Change agents who commit to listening to recipients as contributors to a more successful change than the one outlined in the plan, interact with respect for relationships, and develop expertise

in determining which conversational products will accelerate progress toward the change goals will set a new standard for the construct of change. Change, as well as resistance, then becomes a function of which conversations agents choose to engage in and the appropriateness of those conversations (Ford, 1999; Ford & Ford, 1995).

FOOTNOTE

1. By a personal property is meant the form, characteristic, or attribute of some other entity whether that entity is an individual, a group, or organization, or a system, process, or structure. Thus, for example, ''fear'' would be regarded as a personal property of an individual, ''cohesive'' a personal property of a group, and ''mechanistic'' a personal property of a structure.

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