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# Focus

*A Newsletter published for clients and friends of Wagner Consulting Group*

## Overcoming Resistance to Change

Human brains are hard wired to do three things: match patterns, resist or fight any threats to survival, and respond first with emotion over logic. Many thousands of years of experience have helped shape our brains and instinctive behaviors, while “management” is a brand new endeavor by comparison. The emotional “How might this affect me?” response begins from a skeptical perspective.

The late business guru Peter F. Drucker segregated change efforts into two dimensions: transitional, with a short-term focus, and transformational, which is designed to ensure long-term success. Many organizations struggle with transitional change and its near-term focus, which typically involves adapting to new opportunities or dealing with current threats. Successfully carrying out transformational change is much more difficult, and most of these strategic change efforts fail.

You can improve your making-change-happen success rate by being mindful of our built-in tendencies to resist change and designing a strategy to cope with them. I recommend the following four-step approach.

1. Create a sense of urgency to leverage the “fight or flight” threat response. The leader must frame the need for change as a make-or-break business imperative.
2. Build a coalition. Begin with one or two trendsetters and then methodically enlarge this group until their attitudes and behaviors become the desirable standard. People have an innate need to be a member of a group, and will change their behaviors to fit in.
3. Sell the vision. A clear and compelling vision for the future undergirds the entire change process, and relentless communication of that vision is essential. When starting even a modest change effort, the leader should estimate how much communication is necessary, and then multiply that effort by a factor of ten. Moreover, people throughout the organization should have a chance to offer their reactions and suggestions during the change process. This participation helps create a sense of buy-in, and employees are more enthusiastic and productive when they ‘own’ an idea

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or initiative.

4. Stay on track and build momentum. Urgency and enthusiasm are necessary but not sufficient. Without disciplined planning and execution, the change effort will veer off course and eventually stall. Artful change agents create plans for early wins, and then lead the celebration of each win. Fun is contagious, and provides positive reinforcement of desired behaviors.

Finally, remember two important truths when planning and managing change efforts. The first is that people in organizations are resistant *even to positive change* because change disrupts our routines and expectations. Therefore, discard any illusions that people will jump on the change bandwagon just because the change will make their lives better. The second truth is related to the first: The certainty of misery is more desirable than the misery of uncertainty. That's an example of hard wired brain behavior #3: First respond with emotion over logic. Make peace with these two truths and then operate accordingly.

*Tom Wagner*

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