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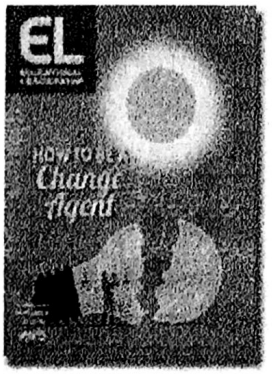

The Tug of War Between Change and Resistance

Michael Murphy

Resistance to change efforts in schools is natural, predictable, and possible to get beyond.

Read Abstract

A few years ago, in my role as district curriculum and instruction supervisor, I reviewed the mathematics achievement of my district's high school students and noted that their performance in advanced placement examinations wasn't up to par. The issue seemed simple: Student achievement was low in a specified area, but our students and teachers were highly capable and we had a districtwide professional learning system to provide resources. I saw a relatively simple path to solving the problem. Yet, after I'd laid out my ideas for changing instruction to fix this problem at a high school math department meeting, the department chair kindly but firmly notified me that the department wasn't going to try any of the ideas I'd suggested.

I was astounded. Years later, however, I periodically reflect on that meeting as an example of what leaders often encounter—reluctance or downright resistance in response to reasonable, manageable ideas for change. Leaders often feel as though while they continue to pull one way for changes that will improve the school, naysayers are pulling in the opposite direction, veering the effort off course.

The good news is that leaders can actively address resistance and begin to manage it. When thinking about managing resistance, it's useful to keep two big ideas in mind: (1) reluctance or open resistance to changes a leader proposes is often predictable and understandable, and (2) you can move beyond resistance by observing how those affected by the change react and then altering *your* behavior, rather than decrying the resisters' behavior. Let's first examine how resistance crops up at various stages of the change process.

Resistance: Perfectly Predictable

In thinking about resistance, remember that human attitudes and behavior toward any proposed change develop over the course of that change (Hall & Hord, 2001). Michael Fullan (2007) built on Huberman and

Miles's work (1984) to suggest that as leaders orchestrate a lasting change, we should probably think of that change as happening in three phases: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization.

Initiation is the "process that leads up to and includes a decision to adopt or proceed with a change" (Fullan, 2007, p. 69). Although resistance can rear its ugly head during any part of a long-term change effort, most likely it will appear early, during this "getting ready" phase. At this point, people confront the *technical* aspects of the change—what they perceive it will require them to do differently. As they assess whether they have the knowledge and skill to tackle what will be expected of them, they often worry that the demands of the change will be overwhelming (Lawrence, 1969).

This "can I do it?" mentality surfaces to an even greater degree as they are pushed to implement the new practices. If anticipating the perceived change caused open reluctance or resistance, that resistance may be even more acute during the implementation phase, when the emphasis is on moving the plan into action. As they continue to face technical aspects, practitioners continue to doubt that they have the skills or knowledge necessary and may begin to show more dramatic resistance.

At first, many practitioners will attempt to implement the change in a way that seems right to them. If they proceed in this way, however, they may meet implementation dilemmas—situations in which the change doesn't go as well as expected.

During implementation, practitioners may also discover that the change is shifting the way people in the organization relate to one another (Lawrence, 1969). These *social* aspects are particularly dangerous. They can cause practitioners to question whether or not they desire the shifts in roles, relationships, and beliefs that they're beginning to see (Powell & Kusuma- Powell, 2015). To me, the social aspects of change can be more confounding than the technical aspects because many people have deep, personal reactions to changing "the way we've always functioned." The technical and the social aspects often feed each other to fuel overt resistance.

A case in point would be those high school math department members who resisted the changes I proposed. I was advocating for changes in instructional strategies, a deeper look into how curriculum aligned with the way students would be assessed, and more frequent formative assessments. Sounds reasonable—but there were predictable reasons why the department might resist these changes.

First of all, the changes were proposed by an "outside irritant." (That would be me!) In addition, the teachers in that department had relaxed into a comfortable place in their instructional practice. When they were confronted with suggested changes, some of them weren't confident in their ability to make those changes. Thus, technical aspects of the change reared up.

Social aspects also played a role. I had taken autonomy away from the department; I was in control of the conversation and the content. This team had enjoyed a lot of professional freedom over the years, and my proposed changes appeared to threaten that freedom. The department chair and many of the teachers probably wondered whether making my proposed changes would dismantle a social and belief system that they enjoyed. So the apparently logical process of identifying a student achievement issue, deciding how to address it, and then taking action flew right out the window in one 40-minute-meeting fiasco.

We might think that during institutionalization, where the practices become embedded into daily practice in deep and powerful ways, resistance to the change will be over. Leaders should be careful of this thinking. During institutionalization, resistance takes on a different personality. If the implementers aren't continually reminded of the purpose of the change, don't engage in practical forms of professional learning to deepen their skills and outcomes, and don't have chances to continually improve on the systemwide development of the initiative, resistance might take shape in terms of a subtle "fading" of the

effort, less overt energy around the change, and a general wavering of focus.

Observe Others, but Alter *Your* Behavior

I became part of the problem with that high school mathematics department because I didn't think about how the work should be properly initiated. I now know that thinking about the three phases of change and how they relate to human behavior enables leaders to anticipate resistance even before it happens. Layering in the two aspects of change—technical and social—that often compound resistance also helps predict the way practitioners may respond to a call for what appears to be a logical, much needed change. Three strategies help leaders see how to adjust their behaviors to meet resistance head on.

Strategy 1: Give People What They Need

If leaders are to manage resistance, they must closely observe the behavior of those affected by the change and then provide whatever that behavior signals these colleagues need—before the behavior turns negative. For instance, during the initiation phase, leaders must focus on the purpose of the change and be clear about the urgent reasons that a shift in knowledge or practice must happen. It's human nature to be driven by a sense of purpose. People will be motivated by an understanding of the overarching rationale. They will seek connections between the work you're championing and the other work they're obligated to do.

Similarly, during implementation, as teachers put the changes in play in classrooms, leaders must notice what teachers need and must have a thorough plan ready to support teachers as their understanding of new practices evolves. It's important that people experience short-term wins during this phase, so they'll be motivated to continue the work until they reach a higher level of sophistication and see the effects on students. Carol Ann Tomlinson and I often talk about the need for people to "organically" grow their own implementation of practices, as long as performance falls on a continuum of standards for the change. Leaders who recognize this and continually push for growth while allowing teachers to till their individual fields are generally more successful in providing success-oriented support. And I believe that these leaders see less resistance.

Strategy 2: Ask How It's Going

It may seem ridiculously simple, but practitioners will generally be eager to talk about the change and be honest about any concerns they have—if you ask them. Asking and then truly listening to this information serve a leader well. Armed with knowledge about how your staff members are reacting to the change, you'll know how to address their biggest concerns. When their concerns are met, people tend to cooperate with change and be more motivated to work toward fully implementing it (Hall & Hord, 2001).

The most effective way to find out how the change is going for your colleagues is to have a short, informal conversation with each individual teacher. These "concerns" conversations should be casual and can occur when a leader happens to catch a teacher in the hallway or classroom. Because the conversations are quick, leaders can conduct several in a day, giving them a snapshot of the concerns.

Strategy 3: Keep the Change Formula in Mind

Keeping in mind a simple but effective formula developed for leaders who encounter resistance helps a leader strategize how to keep resistance to a nontoxic level (Beckhard & Harris, 1987). This formula is D x V x F > R, with D representing the amount of *dissatisfaction* workers feel about the status quo, V representing the *vision* for the change and how it will positively affect stakeholders (in this case, teachers and students), F representing the *first steps* a worker must take to work toward the change, and R representing the amount of *resistance* put forth.

To manage resistance, the product of D, V, and F must exceed the amount of resistance people will naturally feel about the challenging work necessary to make the change. Leaders should consider how they might, in their actions and conversations, strengthen teachers' awareness that the status quo isn't working (D), their vision for the positive effects this change will bring (V), and their level of comfort with their own first steps (F)—so these elements will outweigh resistance.

For instance, principal James McClatchy knew that his students' performance in math was consistently low. In planning with his team, he determined that a multi-year commitment to differentiated practices would address his instructional concerns. Here's how James thought through the resistance formula:

> To raise the group's level of *dissatisfaction* with their current way of teaching math, James knew he needed to begin sharing data in small grade-level teams—and distributing to teachers the best research on differentiation and on how it can help align small-group instruction with targeted, tailored instruction.
>
> To strengthen the *vision*, he needed to clearly describe what everyone would be hoping to see in classrooms—and use that language every time he found himself talking about mathematics in small groups.
>
> To clarify *first steps*, James prepared to describe his requests and break the vision down into manageable steps, individualized on the basis of each person's comfort level. During small-group meetings, James asked each teacher, "What would be your first steps?" and then followed up with each person with that response in mind.

Beyond Tug of War

If I had anticipated the resistance that high school mathematics department would show as a result of my behaviors, I'd have had a much less rocky path with them for the next few years. The lessons about resistance are simple but powerful. Leaders must become skilled in observing and responding to the first signs that unrest is brewing. Additionally, resistance isn't always primarily the fault of the resisters. In many cases, a leader's failure to strategize how to respond to pushback may actually nurture or accelerate resistance.

Better planning for the pull toward change and better noticing of the opposing pull of resistance is the leader's job. When we change our own thinking and behaviors so we create an "us" that accelerates change together, we can end the tug of war.

Author's Note: All names of educators are pseudonyms.

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