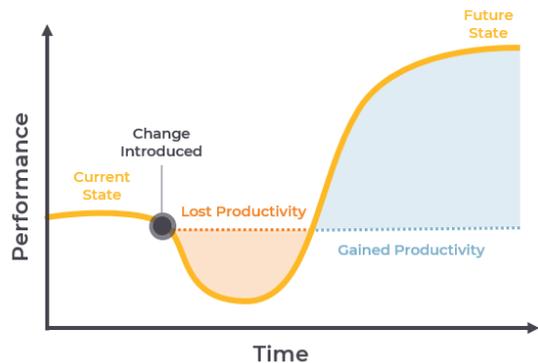


MANAGING THROUGH RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

The Pinnacle Perspective

Resistance is a natural reaction to change. Despite your best prevention efforts, you will likely encounter it when introducing a new project or process to your team. Beyond our instincts, there are many nuanced reasons why we—as individuals and collectively as organizations—default to it. The challenge for you as a leader is to understand and address resistance to change at both the individual and organizational levels. Only then can you manage through it.

Managing the Change Curve



Accelerate adoption and minimize disruption through the active management of change.

To help you gain perspective on resistance to change, we've published a series of whitepapers on the topic. This is our third and final white paper in the series (read our previous two white papers [here](#)).

Resistance to change at the individual level

Heuristics fuel resistance

Even if a change is welcome and beneficial, it disrupts our well-established routines and, ultimately, our efficiency. Our brains are overloaded with decisions every moment of every day. As a result, we divide our day into routines that don't require us to think through every choice we make. Certain actions take place automatically, behaviors become second nature, (e.g., our morning routines), and our mental capacity shifts to focus on more important decisions.

When change derails these heuristics, or mental shortcuts, we must learn and adapt to new ways of working. This requires effort. Yet once we've established a new routine, we feel a sense of calm in not having to think through every action. We can go back on auto-pilot.

The same is true for changes in the workplace. In order to overcome the unpleasantness of disruption to a business practice or process, team members need to know the change will be worth the effort; that it will benefit them as well as the team as a whole. Moreover, team members need to know the risks associated with the change as well as the plan for mitigating them.

To give your team members the information they need, share your change story (i.e., the reasons for the change and the results individuals can expect) in a clear and convincing way. Being transparent about why the change is happening—and how it will impact your team’s day-to-day work—can help your team members return to a peaceful auto-pilot more quickly.

Justified concerns exist about the organizational impact

Sometimes, an individual’s unwillingness to accept change may stem from concerns about the change’s impact on the organization as a whole. In our work, we often see employees raise concerns at the initial stages of a transformation. If this happens within your organization or team, consider walking key stakeholders through each step of the change and soliciting candid feedback along the way. This approach allows you to identify gaps in the future state early in the project’s lifecycle. More importantly, it brings stakeholders along for the journey while enabling you to plan for risk mitigation—and ultimately avoid a major obstacle to deployment.

The most critical thing to remember is this: If your employees are apprehensive about adopting a new behavior or process, be ready to listen. Take an empathetic and humble approach when addressing their concerns. Facilitate honest and open conversations about the realities of the change. Make anonymity an option whenever possible.

Reactions to change are misinterpreted or not acknowledged

Resistance can typically be characterized as cognitive, affective, or behavioral.

Understanding which type of resistance an individual is exhibiting is vital to formulating an appropriate response.



Cognitive resistance is characterized as being thought-based, meaning an individual is influenced by their own thought processes. For instance, a team member who debates the change plan or questions the idea behind it may be engaging in cognitive resistance. Expressing concerns about the change’s impact on the organization, as described above, may be cognitive resistance, too.

Tempering cognitive resistance requires you to once again listen. Keep an open mind and engage—rather than dismiss—team members who resist. Make sure your messaging is consistent and delivered by credible spokespersons. Although it’s important to counter irrational beliefs with facts, do so in a positive and supportive manner.

In situations where your employees’ resistance is affective, or feelings-based, it’s important to meet them where they are. Understand there’s an emotional journey associated with change, as identified by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her work with loss. At first, individuals may react to change with fear or anger.

At this point, these individuals need to know why the change is happening and how it will affect them at a personal level. As individuals move toward acceptance, they often struggle to find meaning, and may feel the need to talk about the takeaways associated with the change.

To address affective resistance, always approach your team members with empathy when introducing a change. Recognize the emotional nature of a change-induced loss. Consider giving team members the space they need to process the change along with the support they need to accept it.

Compared to cognitive and affective resistance, behavioral resistance tends to be more subtle. One type of behavioral resistance we see quite often is passive or passive-aggressive resistance. This can manifest as low meeting attendance, crickets during a Q&A session, or verbal agreements that lack follow-through. Sometimes it may be why managers hesitate to put a name or face on a future-state plan or use qualified language to describe it (void of passion or personal commitment).

Culture plays a pivotal role in facilitating change, as do key stakeholders and legacy processes.

If you notice these types of behaviors, don't overlook them. Consider developing a change measurement plan that includes monitoring for signs of passive or passive-aggressive resistance and addressing them early on. Aim for commitment from employees, not compliance. Dictating that employees comply without first engaging them is likely to turn resistance into open opposition.

Resistance to change at the organizational level

It's not enough to address your employees' resistance to change; you must also look at resistance generated by the organization as a whole. Culture plays a pivotal role in facilitating change, as do key stakeholders and legacy processes.

Culture matters

You could have the most well-designed process in the world, but if your organization's culture doesn't support it, it could be doomed from day one. This is why it's so important to think through the trickle-down effects a change could have on your culture. For instance, say you're attempting to implement a data-driven process in a relationship-based organization.

How could this new process impact the way you recognize and reward employees? How will it affect decision-making? How will it impact other processes? Will you need to change your technology to support the new data-driven process?

Furthermore, consider what you can and cannot control within your organization's culture. A large-scale change that will require team members to think and behave differently may necessitate a cultural transformation.

(Needless to say, these require a significant amount of time and effort.) While smaller changes will not likely require a cultural transformation, they will require you to address the aspects of your organization's culture that could inhibit change. If these are immovable, recognize you may need to pivot your change management strategy in response.

Power of influence comes from unexpected places

It's important to know who has decision-making rights and the power of influence when it comes to implementing change. Keep in mind it might not always be the person with the highest-ranking title. In certain situations, people who have been in the company for years may wield more power and influence than the CEO.

Conducting a stakeholder analysis can help you identify key influencers within your organization. Acknowledge these individuals and identify if they are supporters, detractors, or neutral parties to change. Modify your actions to address where influencers are in the change curve, so you're better positioned to address various challenges.

Commitment to legacy processes

Some teams have done things a certain way for so long, the current state becomes a part of their identity. In these situations, positioning the new process or system as "continuous improvement" can make the change easier for team members to swallow. Aim for iteration, not perfection, as incremental changes still represent progress. Don't be afraid to leave room for error—fail fast and learn quickly. Again, recognize there are things you won't be able to change, and that's OK.

Go Forth Boldly with Pinnacle

At its core, managing through resistance to change is about building understanding within your team. At Pinnacle, we've helped clients address resistance to change using various tools, such as cultural readiness assessments, listening sessions, change leadership workshops, and stakeholder analysis workshops. The more we listen to and empathize with each other, the more successful we can be in implementing change—and in taking steps toward a brighter future. This brings us to our next white paper series, "Moving Your Team Forward in 2021." Stay tuned!

We're here to help you through the change process.

Contact us today to learn more.