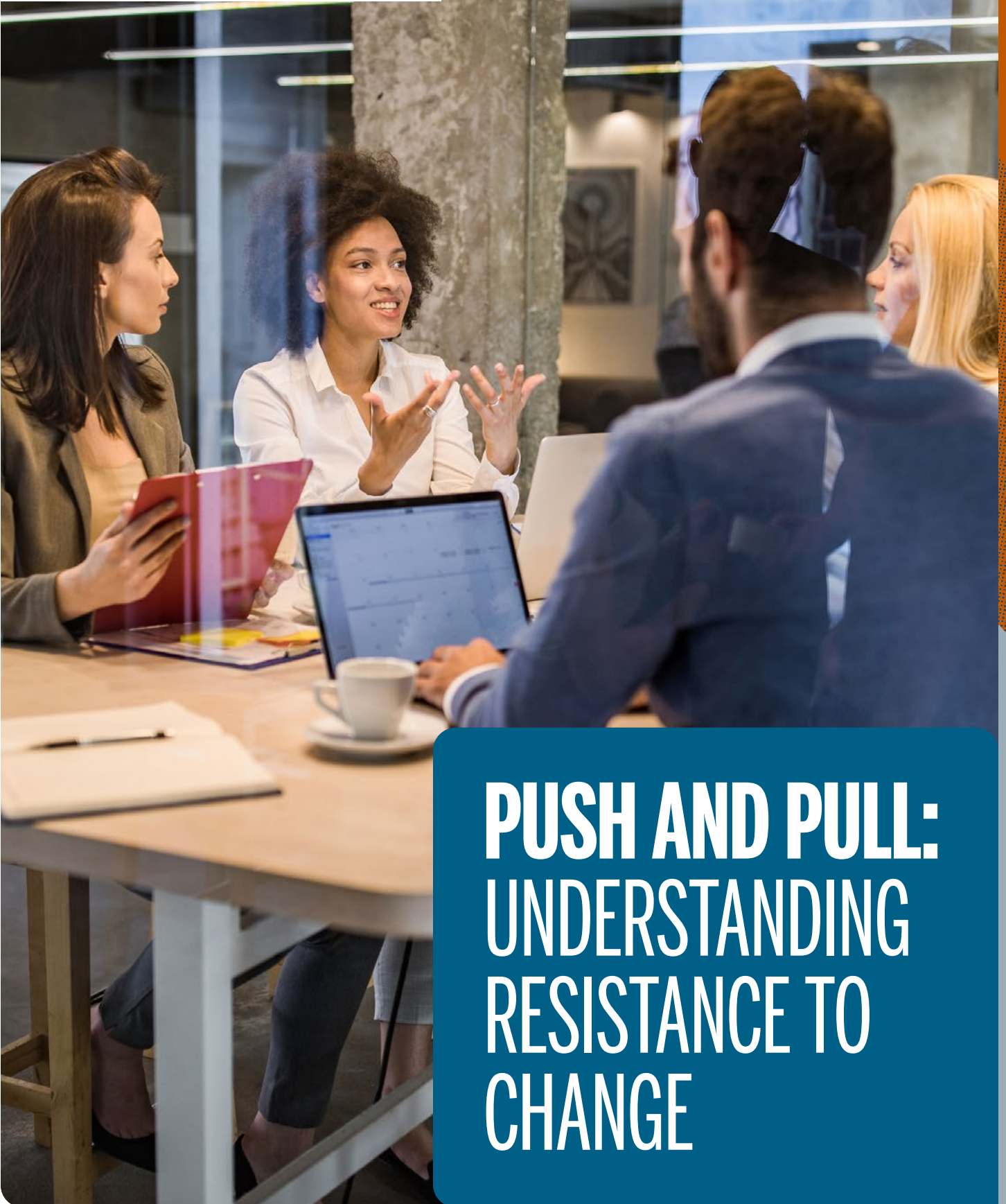




The University of Texas at Austin
Texas Executive Education
McCombs School of Business



PUSH AND PULL: UNDERSTANDING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Change is inevitable. It's something every organization can count on. Just as inevitable as change, so is resistance to it.

Understanding why people resist is critical to your success as a leader. With this insight, you can diagnose the root causes of any resistance present before starting a change initiative. Read on to learn how to deconstruct resistance to change and simple steps you can take to address it quickly and directly to ensure a successful outcome.



WHY PEOPLE RESIST CHANGE

It's human nature to be change-averse; it's embedded in the brain. Part of the brain, the amygdala, sees change as a threat and reacts by releasing the hormones associated with fear, fight, or flight – the body's defense mechanisms. This hardwiring explains why when new change initiatives or ideas are presented people are often resistant – even if the changes are positive. With this in mind there are 6 main reasons for resistance you should be aware of.

Not Worth the Pain

When faced with change, people tend to imagine more negative than positive outcomes. They focus on the negatives; like difficulties during the transition and what will be lost to the change. They do not believe the “pain” involved, things like learning new processes, software, and approaches, will be worth the gain. For them, change often appears to be a large amount of effort or disruption.

Uncharted Territory

Humans possess a fear of the unknown, and often assume the worst case scenarios. In the workplace, this fatalistic type of thinking often occurs when details on how the changes will affect employees after implementation are absent. If employees can't see how a change specifically benefits them, they may fall into the question spiral of asking “what if?” When change is implemented with little warning and people feel caught off guard, it perpetuates the problem. It's likely you'll need to add new tools in a dispersed environment, and there are a range of applications to help you communicate across multiple time zones and locations. Here are a few favorites to consider for your remote team's tech stack:

“Not-Invented-Here Syndrome”

Change, especially when driven by an external force like a consultant or new team member, can be perceived as a “them vs. us” situation. The “them” are those proposing the change implementation. The “us,” then, are opposed to it, with the underlying sense that “they” do not understand the existing culture, systems, or routines. How could someone from the outside implement meaningful changes?

Break in Routine

People are habitual by nature, and disruptions to the status quo can be difficult. When faced with change initiatives, people often struggle to accept that there could be a better way to do x,y, and z, especially when an existing process is firmly established. A departure from routine can be intimidating, scary, and uncomfortable. This move outside one's comfort zone can lead to insecurities.

Incongruent Team Dynamics

Within an organization, individual sub-teams or units may have practices and norms different from the overall organization's. When implementing company-wide transformations, more resistance may come from those sub-teams that are not aligned. With conflicting team dynamics, blanket change can startle some more than others depending on how the change impacts them and how close they are to it.

Misaligned Organizational Systems

Over time, companies build and rely upon a mix of automated and manual processes that lend themselves to becoming misaligned. Processes around reporting and data analysis offer a good example. If a team member is responsible for manually creating executive reports every month, what happens if you change the systems that provide data for those reports? If the executive team isn't ready to change how they work with those reports, the team may resist the changes because "the boss said so" implicitly. Additionally, new processes sometimes have unexpected consequences downstream, not always "playing nice" with existing systems in place and causing friction.

UNDERSTANDING RESISTORS OF CHANGE

In addition to understanding why a person may resist change, it's important to know what resistance looks like. People resist change in three ways – actively, passively, or constructively. Their resistance is based on their overall level of engagement, and whether their response is one of the following: fight, freeze, or flight.

Active Resistance

Active resisters exhibit the fight response. Because change can make people feel out-of-control or unfairly treated, they compensate for lost autonomy with proactive, direct, and openly expressed reactions. Some examples of active resistance include head-on conflict, negativity, sarcasm, defiance, increased problem spotting without solution suggestions, and having a “meeting after the meeting” to talk about frustrations and dissatisfaction.

Passive Resistance

Passive resisters to change have flight or freeze reactions. They perceive changes as a threat to their comfort zone and focus on worst-case scenarios. By stewing in their minds, passive resisters can find themselves caught in a “what if” spiral and not act on their thoughts. Disengagement can be manifested through silent rejection of engaging in a new solution, a total dismissal of a new process, or skipping meetings related to the initiative.

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70% of change efforts fail to meet their goals.

– ACCORDING TO MCKINSEY AND COMPANY

Constructive Resistance

Constructive resisters are employees that are more in tune with the end goals. Although they may harbor reservation or resentment towards a change, they understand the drivers of it. The difference with constructive resisters is that they are actively engaged in the process. Their resistance is informed, based upon an understanding of the effects of change on themselves and others. These resisters are willing to communicate issues they see, as well as offer solutions or alternatives to minimize resistance.

3 TYPES OF RESPONSES



FLIGHT



FREEZE



FIGHT

DEALING WITH RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Before starting a change initiative, it's imperative to be in sync with employees and the organizational culture. Successful change leaders understand their team members and how they work together, and are able to anticipate resistance upfront. Be aware there's no "one-size-fits-all" approach for dealing with resistance, and strive to navigate each situation uniquely. Recognize that resistance isn't always a reflection of the individual, but sometimes of the process. By knowing what to anticipate, you'll put yourself in a better position to turn challengers into champions.

Addressing Active and Passive Resistance

Although active and passive resistance manifest differently, it's possible to take a similar approach to managing them. One-on-one conversations or small group settings should be used to mitigate and address resistance, and can include the following approaches:

- Identify behavior and communicate its resulting impact
- Clarify goals on both sides
- Ask questions
- Use "I" statements (for example "I notice" instead of "you did", "I feel" instead of "you caused")



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Great leaders do not neglect resistors to change; they face them head on.

Addressing Constructive Resistance

Identifying and collaborating with constructive resisters presents a unique opportunity for change leaders. These resisters may have insights into existing processes and the impact the change will have on certain groups. They also may have ideas on alternative changes or approaches. Brainstorming with these individuals may generate out-of-the-box ideas. It may also reduce resistance from the team at large, as people prefer the change they create.

Incorporate constructive resisters into the process through formation of guiding coalitions or a similar forum. These groups allow for co-created strategies that produce “win-win” situations. Using and embedding these committees from the get-go will lead to more buy-in, and converting more employees into champions of change



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People prefer the change they create.

BE AN EFFECTIVE CHANGE AGENT

Successful leaders know the techniques to move people to action and to embrace change, and it is possible to drive change with these strategies. Before any movement has been made on the change initiative, you can pinpoint those who may be most resistant and identify the reasons why. You can get increasing buy-in and commitment from others by addressing resistance and involving key players. By engaging constructive resisters from day one, you'll be able to build coalitions to shape this process.

Resistance is an unavoidable aspect of implementing any organizational change, but by accepting its presence you can address it proactively and productively. **Change may be a tough pill to swallow, but with the right approach you can drive the narrative to convert challengers into champions of change.**



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