

Leading Through Change

Why People Resist Change

“Things work fine as-is.” People are comfortable with the status quo and don’t see a reason to change.

“What’s really going on here?” If the “why” is vague – whether due to poor communication or intentional withholding of information – change feels suspicious.

“You’re not telling the whole story.” When messaging is overly positive and glosses over real challenges, people may feel their concerns are being dismissed or overlooked.

“We’re already drowning in work.” People are already stretched thin. Without time or space to implement / absorb the change, even good ideas can feel like burdens.

“Again? Another change?” When change is constant and unrelenting, it leads to burnout and disengagement.

“This won’t work for us.” The proposed change may seem flawed, unrealistic, or disconnected from the actual needs and context of the organization.

“No one asked us.” If stakeholders don’t have input, they’re less likely to trust or support change – even if the outcome might benefit them.

“We’ve been here before – and it didn’t work.” Previous change efforts that lacked follow-through or ended poorly can breed skepticism, especially if leaders haven’t acknowledged or learned from those experiences.

“I don’t know how to do this.” Without tools, training, or support, people feel unprepared to adapt.

“What happens to me?” Change can threaten roles, influence, and belonging.

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What Helps Change Succeed

Mission and Values Alignment. Tie the change to your core mission and values.

Clear Vision & Transparent Communication. Define what's changing, why it matters, and how it'll make things better. Be honest about risks and downsides.

Stakeholder Engagement. Involve staff, partners, and communities early and often. Use participatory methods (surveys, focus groups). Consider how the change affects different groups, esp. marginalized communities.

Time and Resources. Make sure people have space in their workload and the tools they need. Get input on what resources are needed to successfully implement the change.

Steady Implementation and Clear Roles. Break the work into phases with clear deadlines and decision rights. Assign clear roles. Identify “quick wins” to build early momentum.

Leadership and Champions. Equip leaders at all levels to model and support the change. Identify “change champions” to advocate for and reinforce the shift within different parts of the organization.

Training and Support. Provide necessary training and resources, and emotional support. Acknowledge the human impact, and celebrate progress.

Continuous Learning. Learn from past mistakes and share what's working (or not). Pilot incremental changes, monitor progress, evaluate impact, remain flexible, and keep communicating.

Practical Tips

- ☐ Cross-functional “Project Team”
- ☐ Role clarity framework (like MOCHA)
- ☐ Written communication plan to identify who needs what information, when they need it, channels for sharing it with them, and who is responsible for sharing it
- ☐ Visual project timeline that you regularly revisit and share with audiences to define success, show current state, and preview upcoming work
- ☐ Clear on how input and feedback will be solicited, shared back, and used – examples include:
 - ☐ Surveys (efficient, broad input)
 - ☐ Focus groups (depth and nuance)
 - ☐ Department or team meetings (dialogue and buy-in)
- ☐ Learning debrief to reflect on/capture what went well and lessons for next time

Use your own experience: what's helped/hurt change processes that you've been part of?