



## **People, the Innovation Hurdle**

**Patrick Onions, The Knowledge Studio discussion forum, 22 June 2012**

**In the real world, innovation frequently stumbles at the first hurdle – resistance to change.**

Even the brightest of ideas can be met with objections from staff, managers, directors and even owners. Project managers will find comments such as these quite familiar:

- We don't do things like that around here
- The old ways are the best
- You can't teach an old dog new tricks
- If it ain't broken then don't fix it
- Why bother, we are doing all right
- We'll have to think about it more carefully
- What's in it for me?
- My staff will be reluctant
- It's too late; our competitors are already doing it
- It'll cost too much
- We can't afford the downtime in training and new systems
- We can't afford the reduction in efficiency whilst people learn
- The quality/service won't be the same
- It will cause health and safety issues
- I don't know where to start
- We need consensus before we can proceed
- You'll have to clear it with the union first
- The government should be protecting our jobs
- It is about cutting jobs
- We're not XYZ Corporation that has a history of doing this
- Those techniques won't work here
- Not in my backyard
- Management should sort out their own problems out first
- Prove it elsewhere before trying on my team

Are these objections a sign the project has gone horribly wrong? Is the idea is bad? Is resistance natural? What is it that employees are resisting, and why are they resisting?

Kurt Lewin first introduced the concept of resistance in the 1940s. An entire field of study and practice called 'change management' subsequently emerged and devoted itself to finding ways to shift entrenched positions. Academic focus has shifted from seeing the employee as the obstacle, to seeing resistance as the responsibility of management to resolve, and more recently to seeing the change approach as the problem. Theorists have attributed various causes of the phenomenon:

- Habits
- Loss of freedom
- Loss of control
- People resist being controlled
- Not being consulted
- Challenging the leader
- Challenging for leadership
- Lack of respect
- Change is a tacit criticism of the way that employees are doing things
- Change threatens the way people make sense of their world
- Risk of change is perceived as being greater than the risk of not changing
- Loyalty to 'old' alliances, structures and methods
- Lack of role models for the new activity
- Perceived lack of competence to change
- Feel overloaded and overwhelmed
- Healthy scepticism
- Fear of hidden agendas
- Threatens people's notions of themselves
- Anticipate a loss of status
- Anticipate a change in quality of life
- Belief that the proposed change is a bad idea
- Would like to go in a different direction
- Undermining power bases
- Blocking ambitions
- Short term and selfish thinking
- Payback for past slights or being steamrolled on other projects

Does this mean that people are naturally resistant to change in the workplace?

Probably not! Most employees will not turn down a raise, a promotion, a big bright corner office or a new company mobile phone. Some changes typically enjoy low resistance. The military seem to get on with things without too much insubordination. Large projects have a momentum and inevitability that tends to override individual dissent. Employees readily jump onboard high profile projects or ones that involve celebrities or media. And small groups of willing participants frequently carry projects through the concept and planning phases without fuss.

Resistance is plainly a problem though, so how does one manage it?

It would be trite to suggest that the entire field of change management can be condensed into a couple of pages. Some desk research is recommended, but a few key lessons can be shared here:

- Don't be disheartened by adversity. Too many good ideas are abandoned because they are unpopular, and too many bad ideas are adopted because they are appealing or fashionable.
- Treat resistance as a good thing. It is a sign that people are engaged, are not apathetic, see a future role for themselves, have a vested interest in the outcomes, and is a source of energy that can be harnessed.
- Have a plan. Few people will go into battle for no good reason, so share the vision of the future, the strategy to get there and the reasons for change.
- Manage the stakeholders. Identify who they are, their objectives, anticipate their responses to the plan, and consider how to manage their expectations.
- Think carefully about the locus of power and who has control over outcomes. Does one have the power to drive through changes, the resources to buy support, or the ability to sell the idea and persuade people to cooperate.
- Lead people through the change. Inspire them, motivate, give them confidence, be confident in the outcomes, be resolute and gain people's trust and curiosity.
- It's not necessary to change one's management style. Rather, be honest and act with integrity.  
Don't bulldoze changes through. Even if one's management style is autocratic this doesn't preclude empathy and cooperation.
- Don't hide away in the office whilst people are unsettled or losing their jobs.
- Support middle managers; be more visible, approachable and empathetic.
- If the approach is top-down then have a well thought out action plan ready when announcing the change. People will want to know what the changes mean to them, and will need the confidence that a good plan inspires.
- If the approach is consultative or democratic then enter into honest dialogue. It is very apparent when a manager has made up their mind how they want to do things and are just 'going through the motions' to cover their backs.
- Be prepared to defend the plan. This means having a clear business case, a conviction that the idea will benefit the organisation, and prepared responses to objections.
- Be prepared to change the plan or even abandon the idea entirely. Don't be stubborn or worried about losing face. There may be unforeseen alternatives, complications or costs and it is easier to recover from a small failure than a large one the whole organisation is committed to.
- Plan to help people through the change. This means giving training, advice, career planning, new tools and new work methods.
- Watch the cultural amplifiers. Communication and implementation should be tailored. Use cultural levers like values, heroes, rites and informal communication networks. If the culture is analytical then emphasise data and argument, if it is bureaucratic then emphasise process and order.
- Consider the opinion leaders. They may be early adopters or naturally resistant and will have a strong influence over a group.
- Give people a reason to change. Think very carefully about the benefits from the perspective of the employees. Provide incentives if necessary.
- Thank people personally for their participation and contribution.
- Give people a role to play. Don't just impose the solution upon them, give them the problem and ask for their help in solving it.
- Give emerging opponents an active role to play in implementing the change.
- Share in the glory. Invite peers, stakeholders and opinion leaders to join in.
- Carefully consider any objections that are being raised. Are there valid criticisms of the new idea, the proposed implementation or the way that it is being communicated to staff?

- Don't try to overcome objections with one-on-one logical argument or reiterating the standard list of benefits. People's reasons are often deep seated, emotive and centred around issues a manager has no control over. Speak to their immediate problems and show them how it will benefit them in their jobs or career.
- Don't allow rumours and back-biting to develop. Keep people informed, have a clear official statement or position, communicate frequently, make sure that managers are informed, clear the channels and stick to strict deadlines.
- Systems can be used to implement change when appropriate. It is hard to argue against a computer.
- Don't use forms. Getting people to fill in forms is impersonal and people are often worried about the implications.
- Consider repercussions for belligerent opposition. It may be necessary to moderate the behaviour of individuals or even remove them from the game if this is warranted.

In conclusion, innovation is an essential aspect of modern organisations. Even the smallest of businesses can benefit from new products, services, processes, methods, organisation structures and even supply chain arrangements. Whilst resistance will be inevitable, it can be healthy in small doses. One's chances of success increase dramatically with a little carefully planning and attention, and we hope these tips help you in what lies ahead.