

Stop Referring to People Who See Negatives in Change as “Resistors”!

Part 1 of 2

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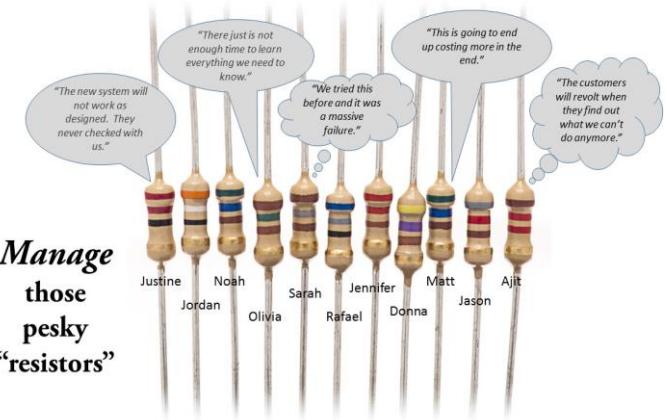
“Resistors” “Blockers” “Challengers”

A Resistor is a passive, two-terminal electrical component, not an ill-informed label that punishes, marginalizes and silences people who see negative outcomes for themselves and others as a result of change.

Let me be clear: If you are a project manager, a leader of organization changes or an organization change practitioner and you are freely using the term “resistor” (or any of its’ synonyms) to distinguish or assign people into some clearly defined category that is unfavorable and tends to contain what some consider to be disagreeable or difficult people, stop it. If that statement sounds strong to you, it is intended to be. Not only are you casting a doubtful gaze upon yourself and your credibility, you are harming the field of organization change management overall.

The term “resistor” (or “blocker” or “challenger”) has been used quite frequently in LinkedIn OCM forums and is often associated with questions from members about how to deal with them. It appears to be used to be a label for people who are not supporting the change, not readily “getting on board” or “buying in” and is, of late, a term that appears to be accepted rather than challenged in these forums of people who are supposed to be skilled and knowledgeable in organization change management approaches and theories. Additionally, on projects I’ve supported in client organizations, I’m hearing those terms more and more and find it quite disturbing. As a result, I feel I have to correct this inaccurate and harmful perception of people and the process they experience when confronted with having to change.

I first became familiar with Organization Change Management in the mid-1980’s through Daryl Conner’s course “Managing Organizational Change” and subsequently, I attended courses at NTL about large system change. In addition, I am certified in Whole System Architecture, a change model by Larry Miller of Miller/Howard. Over the years, I’ve kept abreast of the



field through self-study, professional organizations, short seminars, books and articles on the subject as they have been published. While the word “expert” has been used by others when introducing me, I prefer to be known as knowledgeable and experienced in the field from the almost 30 years of culture, technology and structural change as well as mergers and acquisitions that I’ve supported. That is a brief context that should help you understand where I’m coming from in this post. Enough about me.

The use of the terms “resistor” and “challenger” are born out of frustration at not being able to change everyone. They are a dead-end, hands thrown in the air. Because, if a person is truly and most fundamentally, a “resistor”, then there is no hope. “Justin is a ‘resistor.’” No one can change them. It is who they are at their core. They must be removed because they pose a threat to the change and they are like a contagious disease; they can infect others with their resistance. “Resistors” make change more difficult for everyone, it is believed. And the assumption driving this view: “Resistors” are fundamentally wrong about the change and they can negatively influence everyone who is right about the change; that it is good, necessary and is being effectively implemented. Consequently, they should not be given voice or be listened to. Their views of the change or its’ implementation are at cross purposes with the vision and any positives they can or have contributed in the past are outweighed by their opposition to the current change and therefore can be viewed as expendable.



In contrast, the term “resistance” in organizational change management is any opposition to the change is something I learned about in the mid-1980’s and use it in my practice to educate clients about the human response to change. As a term, resistance is taken from the field of physics and electro-magnetics to describe a dynamic that occurs within a human being when that person assesses a change, sees either current or potential negatives and either withholds full participation in or actively opposes the change because of those negatives.

“Resistance” is about the direction of energy; it is information and should be explored. And, take note of the word “dynamic”. It is not a steady state, nor is it a trait, as the label “resistor” implies. Rather than embracing and fully understanding the dynamic of resistance and all the possibilities it holds for a change, Organizational Change Practitioners who legitimize the trait view of resistance misinform their clients, create unnecessary ill-will and unintentionally increase the resistance they are attempting to overcome.

I concede that as the concept and principles of organization change management are becoming more ubiquitous in the organizational sphere, knowledge will be shared, expanded upon, tweaked, translated and will change over time. But, we should advance, not retreat. Our understanding should become richer, not dismissive. The field should become more sophisticated and nuanced, not be the linguistic dumpster for over-simplified buzz words and ideas. And practitioners, who, if they want to contribute positively to both their field and the clients, should constantly be testing their own assumptions, biases and frustrations and asking themselves some key questions – such as – Is what I’m doing contributing positively to the change?

For more information about the harm that labeling people who are considering the impacts of a change and seeing difficulty, check out Part 2 of “Stop Referring to People Who See Negatives in Change as “Resistors”. But, first, step away from the term...slowly...let it go...let it go...you can do it!

You can’t? Are you a “resistor”?



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