

# Countermeasure to change resistance in medical laboratories



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*It is not the strongest of species that survives, nor the most intelligent; it is the species that is most adaptable to change.*

Charles Robert Darwin FRS (1809–1882)

**Success in management depends largely on the manager's strategic leadership ability, self-discipline, reflexivity, and quality of management training received. Recently, strategic management skills have become a major concern in project management; it has been identified that almost 90% of projects fail to deliver value<sup>1-3</sup>. This shortfall was further highlighted by a recent survey commissioned by IBM Global Business Services involving over 1,500 change practitioners. This study assessed strategies of business, operations, organisational change and technology in order to examine how organisations can manage change and identified strategies for improving project outcomes. It concluded that 44% of all projects surveyed failed to meet either time, budget or quality objectives, while 15% either stop or fail to meet all objectives<sup>4</sup>. These results strongly correlate with two other similar surveys by McKinsey and Company<sup>5</sup>, and Bain and Company<sup>6</sup>.**

It is becoming apparent that effective implementation of strategic change rests mainly on an amalgam of leadership ability, reflectivity and competencies in basic people management skills such as communication, motivation and social intelligence<sup>7</sup>. The term reflection refers to the idea that strong leadership, the kind that promotes successful change in a positive and engaged way, requiring the leader to focus on both the external, which is what they are doing, with and to whom, and the internal process or how they practise and what they can improve in the way they practise. While much of the literature is clear that the management of people, their emotions, ideas, inspirations, strengths and weaknesses is core in ensuring good performance,

we continue to be fixated to the idea that promotion should be based on technical competencies, rather than abilities and capabilities in the art of human relations.

A major challenge in recent years is the correct application of change resistance (CR) management skills during the change implementation phase<sup>8</sup>. CR management can have a considerable influence on relative organisational effectiveness in a form of competitive advantage. Although it can be argued that CR is a natural human reaction to any changes, there is great merit in the argument that often people become not resistant to the change, but simply to the way it was implemented. Indeed, we know that constantly failed change programs and initiatives impact on the emotional wellbeing of an organisation and its members. To borrow from a well-worn saying 'if we had a dollar' for all the times we hear the words 'here we go again' from organisational members regarding change programs, we would be very rich researchers indeed. Nevertheless, if CR is not handled properly, it can wear down an organisation by drawing away valuable time and resources from the main core activity.

With the effects of global integration, technology innovation and complex multinational collaborations are becoming the next wave of change accelerators. Often change is conceived as a surprise or something that does not happen often, and can be planned and carefully implemented. We take a different stance; change is the norm given that the environments within which businesses operate today are exceedingly complex, often uncertain and ambiguous. In other words, change is continuous, routine and normal. Change then requires flexibility and constant reflection upon one's strategy both in a long- and short-term frame. As such both hard (technical) and soft (human) components of change are critical<sup>9,10</sup>. It is not 'either/or' but 'and' that becomes the common rhetoric of leadership. Unfortunately, managers tend to find the soft factors more difficult to deal with and assess than

they find dealing with issues of task or technology, especially as stated earlier they tend to be promoted because of their technical rather than their human skills.

While there are many 'soft' issues that managers struggle with, there are two key people-oriented obstacles facing managers who are more adept at growing and controlling microorganisms in a Petri dish than they are in dealing with random, unpredictable and emotional beings in a medical laboratory. These key issues concern mindsets and culture.

A mindset, as one can probably guess, is the idea that the way people make sense of the world, how they experience it, and react to it develops over time and becomes 'set' as a collection of rules, processes and procedures of cognitions and behaviours. Culture is the shared collective of such rules, routines, processes and procedures that somehow give an organisation a semblance of common practices and processes<sup>7</sup>. Anything we do in organisations around strategic imperatives, change and management by their very nature invoke inevitable reactions, both positive and negative. In relation to mindsets, as change agents we find ourselves dealing with entrenched, socialised and protected ways of experiencing and perceiving the world, and the way in which people act and react within it.

In terms of culture, we are dealing, quite literally with the values that drive the way we do things in organisations. As such anyone who presents a story of 'easy change implementation', and that it is simply a case of getting everyone on board, and that all we need is one exemplary change hero to sell the change is either delusional or inexperienced, or both. There is no 'silver bullet' or step-by-step inventory to assist you to manage the change process. Change is an experience, and it is full of blood, sweat and tears; but you can influence whether you have tears of joy or tears of anger and resentment.

The reality is that contemporary leaders and managers in medical laboratories often remain unprepared for the challenges of resistance inherent in strategic change. To face the CR challenge, managers might consider developing the human relations components of their change leadership and management skills<sup>11</sup>. One way to do this is to accept that resistance is a form of defence mechanism that protects and maintains one's mindset, and preserves one's culture. It might also require managers to accept that perhaps those resisting change might be right in doing so. Now, we are not saying here that we avoid or desist in pursuing strategic changes, but we should be much more reflective in how and why we are engaging in change. Often there is a belief that staff are resistant due to fear of change. These are language games that justify a manager's inability to reflect on how well he or she communicated, justified and shared strategy, and its implementation, rather than any real resistance to change. To be clear, resistance becomes a mythical creature that people

can hide behind due to poor implementation. To this end, CR management is an integral dynamic capability of effective change leadership.

A good way to conceptualise CR management is a form of defensive manoeuvring. Such manoeuvring can avoid or at worst delay inflicting damage through a series of defensive operations in which problems are blocked and dealt with *in situ*<sup>12</sup>. The main aim is to avoid degrading morale or unacceptable human capital losses. Good staff are hard to find and all staff are expensive to replace, with the average employee costing close to \$200,000 to replace (and these are only in-kind costs). For this reason alone, countermeasures to resistance have considerable merit.

## Resistance countermeasures

**Effective deployment of change agents** Frustrated staff tend to express their opinions directly to their peers rather than to the traditional hierarchy. Change agents should be deployed to places where they can fully experience and understand the affected areas, and issues that will affect the acceptance and integration of the proposed changes. Change agents are then better able to advise managers on how to improve the process of implementation. By using change agents effectively as conduits of communications within an organisation enables staff to further participate and engage in the change process. Change agents should have redefined roles<sup>13</sup> and consist of up to three experienced members per team<sup>14</sup>. They should serve as internal consultants and morale auditors by providing constant health check post-integration to management<sup>15</sup>.

### Enhancement of coordinated change communication

It is of critical importance that all members be kept informed on progress, thus reducing proneness to spread rumours and inaccurate reports of the intentions and consequences of change. The main idea is to further enhance feedback, providing social support and modifying tactics<sup>16</sup>. Inspirational, collaborative and supportive styles of communication processes should be used<sup>17</sup>. These enable trust to be created by engagement and getting people to mobilise around a particular change effort rather than deal with the aftermath of post-integration<sup>18,19</sup>.

### Investment into meaningful change management training

It is essential to maintain change momentum at both individual and team levels. Well-prepared and trained members are more cooperative, compromising and collaborative in shaping the desired outcome. However, particular consideration should be given to the need for maintenance, based on the information available on the change status. The training must be practical enough so that team leaders can influence others through persuasive argument if necessary<sup>20</sup>.

**Trust and more trust** Once trust is earned it is not easily lost; the problem is that it is not easily gained. A successive round

of failed, pointless and badly implemented change programs is a great way to rally people towards ambivalence and animosity towards change. 'Here we go again', 'rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic', 'bend over here it comes again'<sup>21</sup> and similar such rhetoric dominates such cultures of low trust that the strategy actually intends to make a change for the better. View change as an ongoing process, not as stages that are easily differentiated and can be managed accordingly. Invest heavily in the process and always consider how trust is being built or eroded by your actions.

## Factors to be considered

The following factors are fundamental and must be considered in planning for the selection and use of countermeasure.

**Do not be too fixated with culture, but rather be all about normative values** Every organisation has its unique corporate culture<sup>22</sup>. Culture is derived and created from expectations focused on winning in the marketplace. It is often argued that it is important to have one culture within an organisation to minimise cultural clash<sup>23</sup>. The reality is that all cultures have dominant- and subcultures that might or might not be integrated or fragmented<sup>7</sup>. What is more important is that people generally agree with normative values. So, it is more important that people agree on an idea of things and the sorts of behaviours that surround their practices. If people agree on an idea that 'littering is bad' and the group they belong to does not litter, it is highly likely that that person will not litter. In this way there is a level of authenticity in the integration of behavioural norms and normative values<sup>24</sup>, without the requirement or necessity of 'one' culture. This means that the change requires cognisance of what it is that individuals and groups find important in terms of their values and their behaviours.

**General management competency** It is apparent that the majority of laboratory managers are required to think critically, communicate and work with non-technical people<sup>25</sup>. However, it has been suggested that many practising managers rarely read extensively on evidence-based management literature<sup>26</sup>. Hence, it is highly likely they are unfamiliar with change management tools that improve understanding and aid in decision-making. Practising managers with a desire for ongoing learning in the pursuit of personal development must improve their own practice.

## Concluding challenge

Adaptive change is relevant to the contemporary complex networked environment that medical scientists find themselves in. It is unfortunate that CR imposes great strain on morale and endurance in many organisations. Only a display of effective change leadership and discipline using CR management will produce sustained improvement. We would like to ask the reader

to ask themselves the following questions: when was the last time you assessed your own change management knowledge and behaviours? When did you last receive change management training? Has your management considered appointing suitable candidates as change agents? Find out whether your reporting supervisor or manager has a change management plan for future operations? It is important to note that if your organisation is not actively dealing with CR, then it is the best time to prepare for future change operations.

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