

## **UNDERSTANDING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE: A Challenge for Universities**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Change is inevitable. Today more than ever the pace of change is accelerating. Where there is organizational change there will be resistance to this change. To deal with the resistance effectively university administrators must understand the nature and causes of resistance to change. Only by dealing effectively with resistance to change can organizational change be implemented successfully. This paper explores organizational change and the challenge it poses for universities. Because universities are slow to change due to maintaining a balance of tradition and change successful implementation of change will continue to be a challenge both now and in the future. The challenge of change is real but the task is not impossible. Historically, universities have met the challenges that faced them; they must be prepared to confront this challenge too.

**Keywords:** Change, resistance to change, university management, Online Education

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nothing produces such anxiety in the workplace as hearing that "change is coming" (Lane, 2007, p. 85). The thought of change creates instability and threatens the structure of the institution of learning. It indicates the current structure is somehow defective and can elicit defensive reactions in addition to the feelings of angst and failure. Those in the institution fear the loss of both meaning and tradition. This uncertainty results in resistance, especially on the part of individuals with insufficient coping skills. Acquiring the ability to cope with change both personally and professionally is essential. "External factors that have come to bear on higher education represent a convergence of forces" (Folkers, 2005, p. 61; see also Devos, 2005). These forces include advances in technology, growth of the Internet, upsurge of knowledge, and globalized transfer of information (Folkers, 2005; see also Lane, 2007). Those charged with university administration must be prepared to meet the challenges of change, to acknowledge that change brings resistance, and to recognize rather than ignore or repress those resistant to change (Devos, 2005; McBride, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to explore organizational change and the challenge it poses for universities. The information in this paper was derived from articles, books, and online sources.

Resistance to change can be defined as observable behavior in response to the disagreement or challenge felt as a result of the introduction of new ideas, methods, or devices.

Resistance to change can also be defined as the degree to which those within the organization oppose the idea of anything new. Resistance to change describes the external orientation toward a change implemented by an institution of higher education. It consists of both overt and covert actions that are employed to prevent, interrupt, or damage the successful implementation of change (Clarke, Ellett, Bateman, & Rugutt, 1996).

## **EXPLORING ORGANIZATION CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Administration and faculty at colleges and universities are presently being asked to cope with the many changes in the academy as a result of technology, diverse students, competition, financial burdens, globalization, etc. According to Kezar (2005), campus decision-making systems are not prepared to manage these increasingly multifaceted changes. As a result, the traditional models of management have come under scrutiny by society for being too slow, too inefficient, and basically unresponsive. Stated simply, universities have been criticized for being too slow to change. Effectively accomplishing change requires a balancing act between change and tradition (Keenan & Marchel, 2007).

Implementing change is problematic in any organization, but this is particularly so in the professional bureaucracy of colleges and universities. In institutions of higher learning, it is the highly educated and autonomous professorate, not administrators, who generally control the fundamental practices of the academy. Persuading professors to make significant changes in these fundamental practices is complicated. Professors have devoted vast amounts of time, effort, and thought into their professions. They are driven by well-established attitudes and ideals developed over years of study and preparation. They are zealous about their disciplines. They view their "work more a 'calling' than a job" (Zell, 2003, p. 74).

Professors are given substantial autonomy over their professional efforts as a result of their high levels of knowledge. They retain a significant amount of authority over their work. Due to the democratic environment, they are accustomed to having a say in organizational change initiatives. Consequently, unless professors agree with proposed organizational changes in the fundamental practices, the changes do not occur (Zell, 2003). Higher education is also compartmentalized, less coordinated, decentralized, and therefore loosely coupled (Boyce, 2003; Kezar, 2001). By loose coupling, Weick (1976) maintains that coupled events are "responsive" (p. 3), and that each event also retains its individual characteristics and some degree of detachment. Loose coupling is a conscious, intellectual reaction to the surroundings of perpetual change (Kezar, 2001). Colleges and universities, as loosely coupled systems, therefore respond to the changes by making minor changes easily.

Conversely, they do not make major changes throughout the institution as easily. Change requires a balancing of factors all of which are not attainable at the same time or a giving up of one thing in return for another, such as stability for flexibility. While tightly coupled systems are defined and disciplined, loosely coupled systems are undefined and undisciplined.

Changes in loosely coupled systems are "continuous rather than episodic, small-scale rather than large, improvisational rather than planned, accommodative rather than constrained, and local rather than cosmopolitan" (p. 70).

Change is a part of the organizational process and occurs because it is believed that there is a need to expand, improve, and transform (Kezar, 2001). Change is ubiquitous and continuous, it occurs everyday (Boyce, 2003). Consequently, higher education is called to meet the challenges of change and prepare students to deal effectively with change. Education is about change and transformation. Moreover, this transformation has a direct impact on society. As the individual is transformed by the educational process, the individual in turn changes society. Higher education must be prepared to teach and encourage continual change (Hughes & Conner, 1989; see also Devos, 2005).

Online education has become a definite example of change in higher education. Changes in the teaching-learning practices are frequently resisted by members of the faculty. They have openly voiced their resistance to change from the traditional face-to-face delivery of instruction to the variety of distance education options available. According to Folkers (2005), there have been a number of reasons suggested for this resistance to change, such as: concerns over the quality of the pedagogical instruction online, challenges of assessing student progress, increases in workload, questions of intellectual property rights and course ownership, and rewards for assimilating distance education into the curriculum. Faculty resistance to change is the natural and inevitable result of all these uncertainties (Lane, 2007).

#### **RESISTANCE ENCOUNTERED IN IMPLEMENTING CHANGE**

A historical strength of higher education has been its success in preserving the traditions of culture, values, and customs. This same strength, coupled with the university's known character of conservatism relative to management, resists change. The socialization process whereby one acquires an identity and inherits or disseminates the **norms**, behaviors, **customs**, and **ideologies** customarily found in institutions of higher learning is resistant to organizational change. For example, the use of senior mentors for graduate students who emulate teaching methods taught to them further perpetuates such resistance to change in the academy (Lane, 2007). Furthermore, faculty tend to be exceptionally independent and overprotective of their "courses, their contact time, and their discretionary time" (Lane, 2007, p.86) as a result of the organizational socialization process.

This attachment of faculty to liberty and freedom develops over time. It is of immense importance to the self-reliant and independent professor and researcher. Interestingly, professors might even go so far as to claim academic freedom rights for resisting change in higher education. It is important to note that higher education has over time rewarded workplace isolation for faculty conducting research and publications of scholarly work.

As a result, open discussions of teaching can lead to questions of inadequacy on the part of the faculty.

Any attempts to learn or gain input from coworkers maybe dangerous. Colleges and universities, furthermore, tend to suppress public criticism and confrontation regarding educational methods and issues.

These issues, so it is thought, are best left up to the faculty and individual professors to manage independently. Therefore, the amount of free time and enthusiasm on the part of the faculty for dealing with change will likely impact their feelings of resistance for the changes proposed (Lane, 2007).

All things considered, according to a grounded theory study conducted by Hartley (2009), what is most critical for effective change are the ideas that encourage commitment from the educational community and stakeholders.

Institutions implementing change are successful by serving both the needs of community and stakeholders. No amount of communication, training, or support from the top can substitute for a compelling reason for any change. Successful change requires constant acceptance of the change. A central force for change is a clear sense of purpose to motivate people to take the desired action, even if the implemented change is difficult for the individuals involved.

### **RESISTANCE TO CHANGE IS INEVITABLE**

It is important to keep in mind that as administration accepts that change is inevitable institutional leaders must also understand that resistance to change is also inevitable. According to Riley (1989), a "fundamental law of physics states that every action results in an equal and opposite reaction" (p. 53).

Consequently, every change implemented will result in resistance to that change. Change agents, those charged with the implementation of change, must understand key aspects causing resistance and how resistance is expressed. Change ultimately causes disruptions in an organization.

These disruptions may range from minor, acceptable disruptions to unmanageable disruptions leading to illness, pettiness, and pessimism. Feelings of negativity (loss of employment, loss of influence, loss of stability, loss of position, etc.), uncertainty about the positive outcomes communicated as a result of the change, or simply feeling doubtful about the future are examples of such disruptions. Each individual in the organization has a limit for coping with change and when this limit is reached his or her resistance is the result (Riley, 1989).

Resistance can take two forms. It can be in the form of overt or covert conduct. Overt in unconcealed actions that are productive if handled well can be positive. Covert, on the other hand, may take the form of obstruction or hindering the change efforts.

Members of the workforce may also be uncomfortable about future change because of a lack of skills necessary to succeed or they lack the motivation to meet the demands of the change. Either way, change agents are encouraged to bear in mind that resistance to organizational change is inevitable and to be prepared for that resistance (Riley, 1989).

### **CYNICISM**

Cynicism is a customary response from the workforce during various stages of organizational change, often because of past efforts that lacked vision, preparation, and completion (McBride, 2010).

In a study by Qian (2008), the researcher explored employee cynicism from a communication viewpoint. The findings demonstrated that the perceived quality of information provided to workers, pessimism of coworkers, and lack of trust in the administration could forecast workplace cynicism, ultimately leading to intentional resistance to organizational change. Unfortunately, the study on cynicism is mixed and is in the early developmental stages of scientific research. According to the researcher, the literature on workplace cynicism is limited.

Qian (2008) defined cynicism as a "specific construct directed toward society, occupations, institutions, and organizational change" (paragraph 4). In other words, cynicism is the disrespect, negativity, or distrust for those responsible for university leadership and is situational in nature. As a result, negative attitudes develop towards the employing institution in three aspects:

- conviction that the employer is short of honesty,
- negative distrust toward the employer, and
- inclination to belittle and criticize the employer.

A goal of this study was to develop a model of workplace cynicism toward organizational change in higher education from a communication viewpoint. The study however, corroborated previous research findings that communication plays a major role in fueling workplace cynicism. Information and relationships in the workplace have a sizable causal effect on organizational change cynicism.

Therefore, by observing cynicism communications between coworkers, the researchers could further discover how cynicism emerges and is communicated through the day-to-day workplace activities. Cynicism might be conceptualized then as an ongoing communication process. According to the researcher, this leads to the question of the contagious effect of workplace networks and the influence that these networks have on cynicism in universities resulting from organizational change (Qian, 2008).

Qian (2008) claimed that this study has a number of workable implications for administrators during organizational change. Workplace cynicism, as a result of organizational change, has a large impact on intentions to resist change on the part of the workforce. When cynicism is prevalent, resistance is likely to be the next phase. It becomes necessary for administration to work to reduce organizational cynicism by discovering the causes thus avoiding potential problems of conflict in the institution (McBride, 2010). Qian (2008) recommended the following three considerations for effective organizational change in higher education. Administration is advised to provide timely information about the change, the quality of information has the greatest effect on organizational "change-specific cynicism" (paragraph 1).

Administration should work to be certain everyone has equal access to the information and it should be clear about where the change is taking the institution. Administration should remember that workplace attitudes tend to be easily influenced by coworkers. Therefore, administration should be aware of the workplace interactions concerning change and understand that distrust in the administration is often a cause of organizational change cynicism.

To maintain trust, administration is advised to generate opportunities for interaction. In addition, it is wise to be aware of the culture and history of the university.

Every effort should be made to create a sense of community before making plans for change and communicating to the workforce that organizational change is imminent. Administration is encouraged to respond to the internal demands from the workplace as well as the external pressure of the competition (Qian, 2008).

### **FACULTY RESISTANCE TO CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Higher education is not typically described as a fast-paced environment in today's world. In fact, it has been traditionally very slow moving where change is seen over years. However, higher education has been tested since the mid-1900s by the technological external forces. These same forces have not changed the basic role of providing an education but they have changed how education is provided (Folkers, 2005). In a study (Zell, 2003) conducted to comprehend resistance to change in higher education, defined as a bureaucracy of highly educated and autonomous professors, it is the professors and not the administrators who generally control the fundamental practices of the academy. Findings suggested that the process of organizational change experienced by the faculty resembled the process of "death and dying" (p. 87) encountered by terminally ill patients. According to the researcher, the faculty experienced "five distinct stages that included denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance" (p. 87).

In a study conducted by Clarke et al. (1996), the researchers found that older faculty, tenured faculty males, and full professors were all more likely to resist change than their counterparts.

Furthermore, tenured faculty were more likely to resist a policy requiring all faculty to advise the same number of students, males were more likely to resist a policy requiring students to take a course to enhance multi-cultural awareness, full professors were more likely to resist a policy requiring faculty to attend grant writing and publication workshops, and younger faculty were all more likely to resist a policy setting limits on outside consulting opportunities.

Hence, the researchers claimed that the level of resistance for faculty is specific to the introduction of change. According to Clarke et al. (1996), it appeared that department heads need to be attentive to the faculty during the decision-making process. Department heads are advised to invest time to learn which members of the faculty are interested in having a voice in decisions that impact them. Determining which members of the faculty are actually interested and including them in the process is worth the time spent for achieving receptivity on the part of the faculty for effective organizational change in the institution.

The purpose of another study of faculty members in a department of education was to investigate the receptivity to the introduction of change (Kazlow, 1977). The researcher claimed that the use of the terms resistance or receptivity have been unclear. For example, resistance and receptivity has been used by some researchers interchangeably. Other researchers have restricted the use of resistance to just unconcealed actions and receptivity to just concealed reactions (Clarke et al., 1996; Kazlow, 1977). Kazlow (1977) recommended that administrators seek to recognize unreceptive reactions to organizational change in higher education on the part of faculty "as the rational response of organizational members to threats on their status" (p. 97).

**By recognizing the unreceptive reactions as rational responses, by assessing the reactions accurately, and by validating these responses administrators are in a position to assuage effectively the feelings of threat to their job security that faculty may have. As a result, faculty should be more receptive internally and therefore, should be in a better position to mitigate external behavioral resistance to the change.**

**No matter how effective a change is, faculty and staff must be motivated to change. Creating this kind of motivation is "the responsibility of leadership" (McBride, 2010, p.6). For organizations to overcome resistance to change, stakeholders at all levels must become involved in the process of change. Even as administrators reach out to resisters, administrators must also stay linked with the "adaptors" (McBride, parag. 8), those members of the faculty and staff who are committed to new ideas, methods, or devices. It is important to remember that resistant faculty and staff can negatively impact an institution's ability to implement change. Resistance can keep an institution of learning from continued growth whether the resistance is rooted in the contagious effects of cynicism or not. Regardless, institutional leaders of higher education are encouraged to "not ignore or leave behind those resistant to change" (McBride, 2010, paragraph 1). In higher education organizational change is resisted. This resistance is not the typical resistance to change that is more common in the business environment. Resistance in higher education is the result of the feelings that faculty professionalism is being called into question and changed.**

**Consequently, understanding organizational change in business is different from organizational change in the educational setting. According to Grant (2003), managing organizational change in higher education is more multifaceted. For example, good academics "cannot be told what to do.**

**They defy control. The kind of creativity required by academics cannot be commanded by an academic master, still less delivered to by a management order" (Dearlove, 1997, p. 57). Ultimately, administrators in higher education need a different "tool kit" (p. 81) than managers need in managing organizational change in the business world. It has been suggested that in the future higher education will become three separate institutions. One institution will be the traditional institution where face-to-face instruction in the classroom is the method of delivery. These institutions have historically met the developmental and educational needs of the students.**

**A second institution will serve the non-traditional students in the virtual classroom. This institution will serve the ongoing education of adult learners with certificates and degrees.**

**The third institution will be the "brick and click" (Folkers, 2005, p. 65) institution. It will attempt to combine the traditional face-to-face method with the virtual online method into one blended method of instruction.**

**The ongoing debate about whether higher education should be changed is no longer the issue. The salient question is how the academy will be transformed to adapt to the current challenges of the day. The many suggestions and recommendations for change differ from a common model for each campus to individualized models. Regardless, proponents believe that a major change is crucial for creating a more functional and successful process of academic governance to meet the challenges of tomorrow (Kezar, 2005).**

In conclusion, change is inevitable. The pace of change is accelerating. Where there is change there will be resistance.

To deal with the resistance effectively university administrators must understand the nature and causes of resistance to change.

Only by dealing effectively with resistance to change can organizational change be implemented successfully.

This paper has attempted to explore organizational change and the challenge it poses for university governance. Because universities are slow to change due to maintaining a balance of tradition and change successful implementation of change will continue to be a challenge both now and in the future.

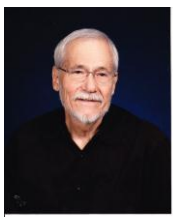
The challenge of change is real but the task is not impossible for university governance. Historically, universities have met the challenges that faced them; they will meet this challenge too.

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