

# Ways to Overcome Employee Resistance in Change Initiatives

Charles Freddy and Charles Mbohwa

**Abstract**— Continuous change in leadership creates instability within the business, and more importantly uncertainty amongst employees, hence the reluctance by employees to readily accept change. There are a myriad of reasons for resistance to change. Change programs such TQM are required within business to ensure that organisations seek continuous improvement in their operational capabilities. Total quality management refers to three main components, namely customer satisfaction; continuous improvement and employee involvement. This study focuses on the employee resistance to change initiatives as a critical component. The lack of employee involvement potentially results in resistance to change initiatives. In many instances employees will not easily adapt to change. It is therefore important to understand that inadequate or no employee involvement will be a waste of valuable resources for any organisation attempting to implement Total Quality Management initiatives.

**Keywords**— Change Management, change programs, continuous improvement, employee resistance

## I. INTRODUCTION

GLOBALISATION has impacted the South African business landscape, to such an extent that, the concept of “adapt or die” is a reality. It is clear to all concern that for businesses to remain profitable and in some instances just to survive there is a need to change the way business is done. According to [1] the only constant is change. It is therefore imperative for organisations to renew and reinvent themselves to remain competitive in this dynamic global market. This would mean revisiting the product and service offerings and more importantly reviewing the delivery mechanism. Adapting to market competition and the continuous advancements in technology is fundamental for any organisation to be successful.

For many organisations the point of departure, is to improve their technology stack, thus enhancing their competitive advantage. The pursuit of Total Quality improvement in products and services, employee involvement is fundamental for the successful implementation of new information

technology systems and the redesign of processes. Employees being the link between the customer and the organisation make them an integral part of any change initiative, hence making it nearly impossible to successfully implement change without their involvement.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Reasons for Change

Continuous economic pressure and increasing global competition has necessitated many organisations to radically change and reinvent themselves. There are various ways of changing or reinventing the organisation such as right-sizing, down-sizing and reengineering. The cost is often high, when organisations fail to change in the ways necessary for success. According to [1] the most serious challenges to improving programs all have the same focus, which are people.

Resistance to Change has received increase attention in literature [12]; [6] where it has been noted that organisations must adapt their business practices or activities to today’s changing market conditions. There have been significant changes in the market environment for example the “2008 global credit crises”, which indicated that organisations must change/adapt to the market. We have seen advancements in technology which means that organisations must adapt to these changes. The acquisition of new systems to improve product design and improve customer service is the new business opportunities that change brings to the organisation. Changes in the business environment are also initiated by regulatory shifts; we have seen since the “global credit crises” the introduction of regulatory capital in the SA financial industry. The introduction of Basel III will again change the regulatory capital landscape that will require a change program to be implemented.

[12] found that change is a firmly established priority for organisations, and since the 1980s and 1990s the experiment with Total Quality Management, customer service initiatives, reengineering, right-sizing, culture change and many other change programs were introduced. It is thought that any resistance from employees can hamper the change initiative, and hence a large dependency is placed on employee co-operation for the success of any change program or initiative. It would seem that when one refers to resistance to change, there is automatic reference to a problem, and in most instances this problem relates to the employees of the organisation.

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### *B. Benefits of Resistance to Change*

Resistance to change serves a function, which is to maintain the status quo or the organisation's perceived state of equilibrium. If the resistance to change never occurred, organisations no doubt would be entirely unstable; they would lack both focus and integrity. Resistance serves to maintain the state of equilibrium until the reason for change is both conscious and compelling. [6]. It is important to understand resistance before one can assume that there is resistance to change. Enquiring about the certainty does not constitute resistance; however it could be seen as resistance depending on which side of the fence one is sitting.

[6] stated that there is no consensus on the definition of resistance. Managers describe resistance in many different ways for example push-back, no buying in, criticism, dragging. These labels embrace a wide variety of behaviors, including not responding timeously to request, making unjustified remarks, and also not completing task agreed to. Resistance is virtually every type of behaviour that is disapproved off.

According to [6] people have reactions to change, some of these reactions may be detrimental to the successful implementation of the proposed change program, even at this juncture there could be value in listening to the underlying communication. The reaction or the so called resistance should be viewed as feedback and what it is telling us that could be used to refine the change process. It is obvious that according to [6] managers must be open-minded in their interaction with employees. What a manager might see as resistance could very well be feedback on a different way of addressing the problem.

### *C. Factors of Resistance to Change*

According to [17] there is an indication that employees are affected by the threats and challenges of organisational change, which have become the norm in today's dynamic markets. There are many reasons for employees' concerns regarding change and this can be linked to individual as well as organisational factors. At an individual level employees may fear change because there is uncertainty regarding what the change program will bring; there is a psychological resistance to change because they want to avoid uncertainty. Employees are accustomed to doing things well known and predictable and the unwillingness to give up familiar task or relationships may cause resistance. The so called "The Comfort Zone" is removed and this leads to resistance to change. There are restraining forces that needs to be taken into account inter alia; uncertainty regarding change "The Comfort Zone", fear of the unknown, disruption of routine, loss of benefits "What's in it for me?", threat to security, threat of position power, redistribution of power, disturb existing social networks [1].

From an organisational perspective, concerns relating to change are reduced, if the organisation communicates to its employees that they have a "voice" in the change process and

that their interests are protected [11]. According to [3] managing change is difficult because employee attitudes towards change are "markedly negative" wanting to do it the old way, this once again speaks to "the comfort zone", people are comfortable doing things the way they used to.

[11] stated that individuals resist change because change disrupts a person's psychological balance and signals danger. Individuals fear losing control and coping with new situations. Change brings new opportunities and challenges for both the organisation and its employees, the challenges are of concern to most employees. The questions other than the loss of power, benefits and threat to security is, am I skilled to do the job? do I need to learn new ways of doing the same job?, the fear of new situation is now a reality for many employees.

There are various schools of thoughts on change and the resistance to change. Charles Darwin famously observed that adaptation to change is the key to survival. It would appear that the "management of change" has attracted a huge amount of attention in the management literature. There seems to be a lot of time and energy spent on how to deal with the challenges associated with resistance to change, resulting in significant amount of literature on the causes of resistance and how it can be managed.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### *A. Experiment Design*

The nature of the research was qualitative. The researcher adopted an interpretation approach for the purpose of this study, as the researcher wanted to gain new insight into the problem of employee resistance to change. It was the intension of the researcher to understand how this problem manifests in an organisation, and how senior management addressed the problem if and when they identify the impact on the organisation.

### *B. Research Design*

All Research design utilised was exploratory as this type of research provides greater understanding of the problem, it crystallises the problem rather than providing a precise measurement or quantification. [16]. According to [9] there are three interrelated purposes for exploratory research namely (1) diagnosing a situation, (2) screening alternatives and (3) discovering new ideas. Point 3 being "discovering new ideas" ties in with the primary objective which is to identify ways to overcome employee resistance to change within an organisation.

### *C. Data Collection*

The researcher obtained data by the use of survey questionnaires that was sent to a selected number of employees within Operations Department. The use of questionnaires provided data without the researcher influencing the outcome of the questions. The use of survey questionnaires however had some limitations in that the researcher was not in a position to clear any misunderstanding

that the respondent encountered and also probe any further response when the questions appeared to be ambiguous to the respondents.

An introduction letter together with the questionnaires was sent to the selected individuals explaining the reasons for the research and the desired outcome. This was sent via email which ensured that the researcher was able to track the progress and receipt of all questionnaires sent out.

The researcher addressed the limitations or disadvantages encountered in the use of survey questionnaire, the researcher interviewed the respondents on an individual basis to address any misunderstanding or uncertainty. The interviews also provided an opportunity for the researcher to understand the reasoning of the individuals and clear any misconception that the researcher had. An interview guide was prepared, focusing on areas of uncertainty where open and closed ended questions was asked with little probing so as to keep the interviewee on the subject and also to ensure that clarity was obtained in respect of the response received. Interviewer was also careful not to suggest certain responses by asking leading questions. [14].

#### *D. Sampling*

Sampling is any procedure which uses a small number of items or part of the whole population to arrive at a conclusion regarding the entire population. [16]. It was extremely difficult to survey the entire population in the case of the organisation chosen (150 employees). There will be time constraints, and labour intensive and it could be very costly. Sampling therefore will cut costs, reduce labour requirements and gather vital information timeously. The other advantages of sampling are the accuracy and reliability of information gathered.

The researcher selected a random sample of fifty respondents; the researcher ensured that a minimum of thirty five responses was received. The initial selection of fifty respondents catered for the potential non responses from the sample population.

### IV. RESULTS OF STUDY

#### *A. Senior Management Role*

According to the study senior management is seen as the drivers of the change program, employees believe that senior managers are sitting up in their offices instructing the business to change, but there is a lack of communication. Fifty seven percent of the respondents indicated that senior management does not confront staff members who are openly unsupportive of the change initiatives. It is indicated that these employees bring about a negative environment and disturb the moral within the area because of their negative behaviour and attitude to the changes. Their resistance to the changes manifests in their interactions with other staff members and line management.

Employees who are resistant to the changes believe that senior management do not involve them in the initial stages

but rather at the end when they are responsible for interacting with the customers and they are the ones in the firing line. They also believe that because of the frequent changes in senior management, they are the people who "carry the can" when things go wrong. Employees are the scapegoats whilst management is promoted.

Sixty percent of the respondents believe that senior management has good intentions and are willing to take some risks to improve the business, but the loss of employees due to the lack of communication and involvement are not considered. It is understood that there will be casualties but senior management do not communicate this honestly to the employees, which results in employees seeking new employment with competitors. This indicates that employees are resistant to change efforts and the root cause is management communication or the lack thereof.

There seems to be a fifty percent split in terms of senior management ensuring that there are adequate resources to deal with change in the organisation. It appears that fifty percent of the people do not agree that senior management provide sufficient resources for changes, this places pressure on the staff as additional work may be required during the change initiative and the workload has to be completed by the same people. This could lead to employees being disgruntled, which leads to resistance to the change implementation. This resistance would be evident in the sudden increase in sick leave and staff turnover

Another critical point that was noted was that forty five percent of the respondents stated that it was important that senior management should address unsuccessful implementation instead of playing the "blame game." It would appear that the respondents experienced unsuccessful change programs previously and the effects of those unsuccessful programs. This indicates that employees are aware that problems exist and instead of implementing corrective measures, scapegoats are sort and sanctioned.

#### *B. Line Management Interaction*

Seventy four percent of the respondents indicated that line management involvement to reduce resistance from employees is nonexistent. Although line management may understand the need for change, they are obviously not addressing this with employees who may not see the so called "bigger picture." Line management is therefore responsible for bridging the communication gap that exists between senior management and employees on the ground. There is overwhelming response indicating that line management does not address resistance from employees and this indicates that there may be a communication barrier or current management lack the appropriate skills to identify and appropriately deal with resistance from employees. It may be viewed from line management that confrontation with employees is not necessary this however could result in poor morale as well as loss of skill and knowledge thus impacting on staff turnover within the operations environment. It was also interesting to note that from the fifty percent that thought that senior

management provided adequate resources, at least sixty five percent were junior and middle management.

Employees are not confident that their immediate line manager understands the need for change and the impact of these changes on the department. This is critical as line management must be able to link the department goals and objectives to the change program otherwise there will be a lack of buy-in from employees if changes initiatives are not driven from management.

Employee involvement is an integral part and is a must for any change initiative to be successful, however fifty two percent of the respondents indicated that line management does not involve employees in change initiatives. The other forty eight percent do believe that there is a lack of employee involvement but sixty percent of the respondents are either junior or middle management. The reason for their positive response could be because these respondents are responsible for business process development and information technology system analyses.

The dissemination of information in the business about the progress of change initiatives indicated a fifty percent positive response, it would appear that the sharing of information about the progress of changes stops at a certain level and employees in the frontline of the organisation do not receive the feedback. Sixty two percent of the respondents also indicated that inputs provided to senior management are not reflected in the decisions made by management. It seems that inputs are requested from employees, but believe that the feedback provided up the line to senior management is not used in decision making. This could result in negative morale as employees may feel that their inputs are not used, and could feel alienated.

#### *C. Employee Learning and Industry Information*

There is overwhelming response indicating that management within the organisation provides learning opportunities and industry information to employees concerning change initiatives. Providing learning opportunities and industry information is important, but more critical is acting on the feedback received from employees. This is where respondents indicated their displeasure that feedback provided to senior management is not acted upon. Providing learning opportunities and industry information that is not followed up by assessment to ascertain the understanding by employees serves no purpose and value. Management must follow up on progress and ensure that the information is relevant at the various levels organisation.

#### *D. Change Management Framework*

Although there is no clear cut decision indicating whether or not there is a Change Management Framework, fifty percent of the respondents agree that there is such a framework that is used for all change initiatives. Further investigations regarding the existence of a framework revealed that there is no framework in place. The confusion regarding the existence of a framework could possibly be

because a draft Project Management Framework is in place, and it is highlighted based on the number of projects being implemented. The Change Management Framework is not in place and therefore there is no structure in terms of change initiatives. The Project Office focus on project management and only involve project stakeholders and key support function inter alia risk, legal, compliance and fraud areas. There is no communications or structured process advising employees regarding change interventions.

#### *E. Employee Adaptation*

Sixty percent of the respondents agreed that they find difficulty in adapting to change initiatives because of the inadequate communication from senior management. Employee resistance will increase as a result of poor communication, they are not included in the process and will find it difficult to adapt to new situations in a short space of time.

The lack of communication or inadequate communication creates uncertainty, and this uncertainty creates fear of the unknown amongst the employees. The fear of the unknown is one of the principle reasons for resistance to change. Another very important aspect to consider is that benefits of previous initiatives have not been communicated to employees and therefore sixty five percent of the respondents indicated that benefits of past changes to the organisation and the individuals were not evident. It is important to celebrate successes more especially when the entire organisation is affected. It is clear when sixty two percent of the respondents agree that there is no evidence of previous initiatives being successful, and like previously stated if successes are not celebrate or brought to the attention of employees it is assumed that the change initiatives were unsuccessful.

#### *F. Human Nature and Resistance*

Although the results of the research have indicated that employees felt that human nature is not a cause of resistance to change, it is difficult to completely agree with this sentiment. The reason for this observation is that people find it difficult to objectively view themselves as a cause to something that is perceived to be a negative action. The general view on all questions pertaining to employee contribution to change initiatives was rated as positive, indicating a certain amount of bias from the respondents.

Programs such as downsizing and reengineering have been evident within the organisation, and resistance to these changes was evident in individuals and groups in the form of hostility to management and conflict amongst co-workers. It is impossible to think that there will be no resistant from employees when their jobs are at stake in a downsizing intervention. It will be inhumane not to be affected by these kinds of initiatives where one does not know if one will be employed or not after the restructure. It is therefore human nature to be resistant to change if one is materially affected. This is evident as eighty five percent of the respondents agreed that their teams are willing and able to make the

necessary changes that business needs. This indicates that the respondents do not believe that they are responsible or display any resistance to change. The respondents also believe that they are supportive to senior management in change initiatives, however resistance is not just saying about saying no, but rather manifest in various actions and behaviors'.

According to the results it would appear that employees do not believe that there is resistance, and changes in the workplace are taken in their stride. This is difficult to understand as the staff turnover in the operations environment has been fairly unstable over the last four to five years.

It appears that there is significant reference to senior management for failure of successful implementation of change initiatives; employees do not believe they are the cause of any failures. This seems to be an unreasonable assumption.

## V. RECOMMENDATION

Senior Management must take cognizance of the outcome of the study where it was highlighted that communication was lacking. Communication is critical at all levels of the organisation and senior management must ensure that communication more especially in change initiatives is cascaded to all employees. Communication should also not be one way, as feedback from everyone concerned is important for the organisation to overcome the communication barrier.

Acknowledgement from employees that resistance exists in any organisation is sometimes beneficial because it may redirect senior management to re-evaluate their choices which can have a positive impact on the organisation.

Change Program Framework is an essential process document that needs to be developed and communicated to all staff. The framework will guide the implementation of new initiatives and will also provide employees with measurement standards on the effectiveness of change initiatives. The framework will provide guidance to internal and/or external change agents on the implementation methodology.

Senior management has provided learning opportunities and industry information to employees, this however is pitched at a level that that people do not understand, and this therefore adds no value to their job function. Employees do not see the benefits and will indicate that information or opportunities are scarce.

Change programs can be successful if the resistance is minimized and there are two important things to be noted, (1) resistant can be predicted, and (2) resistance cannot be subdued. Resistance is to be anticipated and must be used to improve the change initiative. Resistance from employees must be used effectively by management as feedback.

Senior Management must ensure that they deal with resistance from employees effectively and this can be achieved by creating a climate that is conducive to change; employees must be able to communicate with each other up and down the structure without the fear of reprisal.

Management must ensure that vision is clearly articulated, employees understand upfront where the organisation wants to be. This creates certainty and employees will want to contribute to the progress of the organisation. The vision is not a closely guarded secret, but rather the compass that provides direction to employees.

Another critical component would be communication, many initiatives fail because of the lack of communication. Two way communications is imperative for success. Resistance is reduced because people are being informed as to what the organisation seeks to achieve. Feedback from employees must be acted upon and feedback to employees must be given. This creates open and honest communication lines between senior management and employees.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The study indicated that employee resistance is not existent within this environment, which is contradictory to the actual situation where it is evident that changes are not supported by all staff. Staff turnover has been very high within the Operations department for many years. The survey indicates that employees believe that management is responsible for many of the problems because of poor communication down the line. Information is not circulated to the bottom of the organisation where it is most important as this is where the customer service is provided.

Once again employees do not see themselves as resisting changes, which could be seen as inaccurate. Employees perceive resistance to change as being negative and this could be a misconception as resistance could be positive when the energy is channeled in the correct manner.

The absence of a Change Program Framework has also resulted in inconsistent assessment of previous initiatives, and employees believe that the initiatives failed because there was no real measurement in place.

Change in organisation are inevitable because the dynamic world we live in, however senior management must ensure that open and honest communications are cascaded to all levels within the organisation. Many employees are resistant to change because senior management has not displayed honest and ethical behaviour when dealing with change initiatives. Employees have seen changes in organisation only to find that the restructuring and downsizing have resulted in many people losing their jobs, but senior management numbers have increased. This is seen as dishonest behaviour on the part of the organisation and its leadership.

Further research is required as this was a preliminary investigation into resistance to change initiatives. The scope should also be extended to include senior management as there is contradiction from low levels of the organisation. It is evident that employees hold senior management responsible for the many failed initiatives within organisation.

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