

When Clients Resist Change

Mark Lipton

It comes with the territory of consulting.

You sit across from the client, resolute in convincing her of the need for change that will ultimately help her organization. You perform the classic roles to the best of your ability: understanding the problem, assessing the alternatives, and providing a recommendation with compelling evidence to support it. Often, the optimal course of action is a no-brainer from your vantage point. You explain the recommendation and encourage her to adopt it.

But she stares at you as if you were speaking a language in which she never quite became fluent. She responds with a washed-out, glazed-over stare that screams, albeit nonverbally, "You expect me to do that? I don't think so!" You have been stonewalled.

You may experience a more ubiquitous variation when you suggest changes that seem unassailable and the client signals agreement with your analysis of the problem. He bobs his head in affirmation throughout the presentation but, when you begin to discuss implementation strategies, the bobbing becomes less enthusiastic. The nonverbal signals here are saying, "Yes, I understand you, but the status quo is a more comfortable place for me. I think I'll just keep things the way they are, regardless of whether following your advice is best for me." He may be telling you what you want to hear, but he is hunkering down, marshaling his forces to resist the change.

This article will explore the nature of client resistance and provide a guide for identifying it. In a subsequent issue of

Your client stonewalls. What do you do? Stronger advocacy for your views may not be the best response; begin by seeking to understand what this resistance really means.

Votre client se bloque. Qu'allez-vous faire? Un soutien véhément de vos arguments n'est peut-être pas la meilleure solution. Commencez plutôt par essayer de comprendre le fond de cette résistance.

Ihr Kunde ist ausweichend. Was sollten Sie in diesem Falle tun? Eine stärkere Fürsprache für Ihre Meinung ist nicht immer die beste Erwiderung. Versuchen Sie als erstes zu verstehen, was der Widerstand des Kunden wirklich bedeutet.

JMC, I will explore alternatives for managing resistance once it is identified.

Do Consultants Resist Client Resistance?

Consultants will ultimately recommend that you do whatever you're not doing now. Centralize whatever is decentralized. Flatten whatever is

vertical. Diversify whatever is concentrated and divest everything that is not 'core' to the business. You'll hardly ever find a consultant who recommends that you keep everything the same and stop wasting money on consultants. And consultants will rarely deal with the root cause of your company's problems, since that's probably the person who hired them. Instead, they'll look for ways to improve 'strategy' and 'process.'

Change is caused by consultants. Then you need consultants to tell you how to handle the change. When you're done changing you need consultants to tell you that the environment has changed and you'd better change again. It's a neat little perpetual motion machine.¹

Dilbert, one of the more cynical commentators on American management in the 1990s, may be exaggerating the extent to which consultants push for change, but his general theme has great relevance to why clients resist.

I spoke with many seasoned consultants individually and in small groups about their experiences with resistance. I was not too surprised when all

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acknowledged that they encountered resistance more frequently than they liked. When it was experienced, they found it frustrating and, more important, they believed it diminished their effectiveness.

So it was surprising to not discover the topic of client resistance addressed in academic journals, professional publications, and the educational venues that train consultants. A rigorous literature search turned up little of substance on the topic of managing client resistance. Professional publications, as opposed to research-based academic journals, view "resistance to change" in the context of those on whom change is imposed by people in authority. For example, reengineering can force both subtle and profound changes on people in organizations but the change is decreed by someone with authority in the organization. Possessing the authority to enact change is one of the obvious differences between a consultant and a manager. Unfortunately, the resources that may help us to better understand how to influence others to change when one has no authority are limited.

Perhaps one reason the profession rarely engages in public discussions of client resistance is because such a potentially sobering dialogue can expose the limitations that "change agents" face. Acknowledging client resistance requires that one look within and determine whether both the change recommendation and the influence strategy chosen is appropriate to each client. It further encourages consultants to question whether the resistance is legitimate, not because the client's rigidity is psychologically bound up in his or her own personal issues, but because the consultant's recommendation or implementation strategy is wrong and the client

doesn't tell us directly. Since consultants possess the same complicated frailties and intrapsychic dynamics as clients, they may not even be consciously aware of resistance because of their own defensive issues. This is known as counter-resistance: a consultant resists being consciously aware of the client's resistance because of the consultant's own unresolved issues.

Resistance to change is a catch-all term that is often used to describe anyone who does not change as fast as we do. It also includes those who refuse to budge. Viewed this way, resistance is considered an obstacle and something to be overcome at all costs. This, in turn, may lead to strategies for overcoming the resistance that do no more than intensify the real resistance and thereby thwart possibilities for change.

When the notion of consultant-driven change is discussed, it is typically in the context of how best to sell the change to important stakeholders. For example, the president of a computer systems consulting firm was thoroughly frustrated. His client, the manager of information services for a national trucking company, would not act on his advice to make a significant purchase of new system hardware and software. "I explained to him how it would streamline the applications which now seemed to be held together with bailing wire. I knew he was very concerned about maintaining a secure 24-hour no-fault system. His current system was an old patchwork and ready to crash at any moment. And finally, I showed him how the new system would end up costing less than what he had now, since he wouldn't be paying us to come in to constantly put Band-Aids on the current machinery. He just kept saying 'no'."

The "selling" of the change seemed

appropriate to the consultant. When he received overt resistance, he simply pumped more ammunition into the chamber and aimed for another shot. Not hitting the target—convincing the client to change—was less troublesome to him than failing to understand why the client could not assimilate the strong arguments and agree with him.

Why Resistance?

Resistance is considered a natural reaction, one step of a process that ultimately leads to adaptation. It is a normal response for those who have a strong vested interest in maintaining the status quo and guarding themselves against loss. "Why should I let go of something that has meaning for me? If I let go of it, what do I get in its place?" In organizational settings we too often oversimplify resistance at the beginning of a change process. It is seen as "I won't," rather than an expression of the more complicated question "Why should I?"

Client resistance to change therefore means seeing resistance as normal, something most of us do to protect our self-integrity. It is a potential source of energy, as well as information, about the change effort and direction. In general, going with the resistance—not condemning it but trying to understand its sources and motives—can open up possibilities for realizing how to influence change with individual clients.

The resistance consultants experience is not unlike the resistance experienced by psychotherapists. In both consulting and psychotherapy, resistance is a paradoxical reluctance of the client (or patient) to participate in the change (or treatment) process. In both cases, the client who is resisting becomes temporarily unwilling or unable to fulfill

the terms of the original contract, even though he or she continues to want help and to believe in the potential helpfulness of the consultant's or therapist's efforts. Freud began to regard resistance as being itself an important subject for interpretation, to be explored and understood rather than merely removed.²

In both cases, resistance must be differentiated from situations in which the client feels that he or she has all the help he or she wants or needs, or in which they have a basis for concluding that the psychotherapy or consulting has little to offer them. In these situations, the reluctance to continue treatment or consulting services represents a rational decision. With true resistance, they keep asking for more help to facilitate the change, but their resistance to the change sets up the paradox: please help me, but I will resist you.

Manfred Kets de Vries, a management scholar and consultant as well as a trained psychoanalyst, suggests several common motives for resistances shared by both psychotherapy patients and organizational clients.³ First, they may be reluctant to change because they derive benefits from the dysfunction, such as care and attention. This is frequently known as a secondary-gain resistance. People may ask for help in changing when in fact they only want attention. Secondary-gain resistance in organizations often shows in people who crave attention, if not affection, in order to cope with their weaknesses and insecurities. They generally will appear to cooperate with change agents just to receive attention, but they will resist actual change. After all, actual change may cause them to lose the attention of the consultant or others within the organization.

Secondary gain appeared to be the

foundation for resistance from the information services manager at the trucking company. He felt needed—if not indispensable—with the current system. The president of the trucking company knew that the manager was the only one who intimately understood the rickety system (aside from the consultants). Keeping the system up and running, which only he could accomplish, was critical to keeping the business breathing. The consultants were mystified when the manager denied them a meeting with the trucking company's president. When they realized the manager did not want the president to know that a cost-effective solution existed for reducing dependence on the manager, the source of resistance became clear. The consultants attacked the secondary-gain motive by showing the manager how the new system would legitimately bring him more attention from senior management because it would dramatically expand the company's options and reduce their costs.

Another source of resistance can be provoked when there is reason to examine the roots of a client's difficulties. When we are able to see resistant behavior, we are observing defense mechanisms at work. Clients initiate an assortment of reactions to defend themselves from painful realizations and maintain personal homeostasis. Defense mechanisms, pathological or healthy, appear in all aspects of life but particularly in emotion-laden situations involving long-standing interpersonal relationships. This is particularly true for organizational scenarios that involve shifts in power or authority or that require significant personal development to perform in a new position or different culture.

Resistance, therefore, inevitably ac-

companies a client's efforts to come to grips with an understanding of—and need for—behavioral change. Few people can sustain looking within without some waxing and waning of their enthusiasm and tolerance for it. The stonewalling example at the introduction of this article represented a moment of truth for this manager. Her management style had served her so well that she rose to become a division manager. The leadership required of her now, however, was in many ways antithetical to the management style she had found comfortable. Her washed-out stare to the consultant was transparent; one could almost hear her thinking, "Yikes! I have to radically change the way I manage. I may lose power and control. I don't know if I'm up for this scary challenge."

A third motive for resisting change occurs when the new change may reflect poorly on one's past performance. We may see this when an executive responsible for a significant organizational restructuring realizes that the people he chose for his senior management team were poor matches for the position. He may feel that to accept and implement recommendations for changing the strategy, policies, or procedures that he formulated will result in an admission of past incompetence. He may also believe that implementing the new change will lead to lower status in the eyes of other members in the organization. Adopting to the change means "losing face."

Change is a disruptive and, at times, traumatic event for many. It generates a resistance that mobilizes a broad array of defense mechanisms. There is a great deal invested in the psychological status quo, so a myriad of forces strive to create inertia and resistance.

Identifying Resistance

Unlike psychotherapists, who use resistance as a central aspect of the therapeutic process, consultants generally view resistance as an annoyance to be overcome. It is not the typical consultant's role to become the client's therapist. In fact, it would in most cases be inappropriate, unethical, or in some jurisdictions illegal. But the first step to managing resistance requires seeing it for what it is.

The following three categories of client behavior encompass some of the most frequent ways in which the subtler forms of resistance can be detected:

1. Client Reduces the Time in Contact with Consultant

The simplest way for a client to resist a change-oriented consulting intervention without renouncing the initial contract of engagement is for him or her to find "reasons" for reducing the amount of time spent in contact. Clients who show up or start meetings late, cancel or miss appointments, or prematurely propose to end the intervention plan are likely to be resisting full participation in the change through the simple strategy of limiting their exposure to it.

I have found it not uncommon to have meetings canceled or truncated during management coaching sessions or when less-than-positive updates on significant change initiatives are provided to divisional managers. "Can't make the meeting, I've been battling wildfires all day"; or, "Sorry I'm late, my schedule's just been getting ahead of me today. I've got to run to another meeting in twenty minutes." How much resistance and how much reality underlie such events depends on the context in which they occur.

Explanations of missed or abbreviated

meetings may strike the consultant in one of three ways. Some will appear so realistic and far removed from the notion of resistance that they suggest little reason for thinking about them further. For instance, there was a severe crisis that required absolute priority of the client's time and attention. A second sort of explanation seems ambiguous. Did the client's schedule require the meeting time to be cut by more than half because the day's commitments were beyond his control, or did he lose control as a means to shorten the time with the consultant? A third type of explanation leaves little doubt from the beginning that the client's behavior reflects resistance and should be considered as such. Either his actions have been transparently resistive or his initial explanation of otherwise ambiguous behavior rings so false as to relieve it of any ambiguity. A manager participating in a coaching process repeatedly "forgot" to distribute questionnaires for a 360° feedback process that included his direct reports and manager; he "got stuck" at lunch with a colleague prior to a meeting when he was to receive results of the 360° assessment, and he "never had the chance" to find opportunities to practice developmental tasks that he committed to as a result of the assessment results. Coincidence?

Particular attention should be paid to a client who proposes prematurely to terminate the consulting process. There are legitimate, non-resistive reasons for this, such as budgetary cutbacks, structural changes in the organization that make the original contract irrelevant, or perhaps true satisfaction of the client's needs, albeit sooner than expected. Nevertheless, attempts at premature contract termination can signal resistance. In an attempt to improve the management

skills of young technical wizards in a fast-growing software firm, the president was strongly encouraged to model the behaviors both he and the consultants agreed were necessary for all managers (though not currently modeled by the president). After 12 months, the consultants received a call from the president (who rarely modeled the new behaviors) informing them that they were being terminated because he was not seeing results as rapidly as expected.

2. Client Restricts the Amount or Range of Conversation

Perhaps the most common manner in which a client can show resistance with a consultant is by restricting the amount and range of what gets talked about. Any effort by the client to limit what or how much he or she says can automatically be taken as a manifestation of resistance. Three kinds of language can signal when such limits are being imposed: *Silence* is when a client talks noticeably less freely than usual or stops talking altogether. There may be circumstances external to the client/consultant relationship that cause this, but it nonetheless signals resistance in the present situation. *Fixation* is when a client restricts the range of their conversation. A client may resist a change initiative by keeping the conversation focused on certain individuals or organizational characteristics when it is clear to the consultant that other people and characteristics play a part. When the consultant suggests these other factors, the client is drawn back to discussing the people or objects on which he is fixated. To the rational observer, something may seem illogical and amiss.

Fixations over the content of what gets discussed are a form of *avoidance*, the third language. Avoidance pertains

primarily to *what* the client is not talking about rather than *how* he is not talking about it. When I was giving feedback on my observations to a divisional manager about the style in which he led a senior staff meeting, he would consistently ramble on about the content of the agenda. This served to sidetrack our conversation away from his own behavior at the meeting. For example, when I pointed out how he changed the discussion topic every time a conflict arose between one or more of his direct reports at the meeting (a "process observation") he would lecture me about who was right and wrong, rather than his own actions. When I noted that others did not have the opportunity to provide project updates (the formal reason for these meetings) because he monopolized the time, he began to justify the importance of his personal project. He avoided discussing how he managed the meeting by focusing on the content of his monologue during the meeting. This overwhelming preference raised the red flag of resistance.

3. Client Seizes on Short-Lived Improvements

There are times when rapid change in the prescribed direction indicates resistance to the broader change initiative rather than any real benefit derived from the consultant's actions. A client who feels reluctant to continue in a consulting relationship may suddenly find himself performing much better or realizing that the problem has corrected itself without the need for further change. When this type of improvement is noted to the consultant, the implied message is clear: "See, we're doing much better already, and I don't really need to continue with this effort."

Obviously, a careful distinction must be drawn between actual, enduring improvements produced by the initiation of the change effort and illusory, short-lived improvements based on the flight into bliss. A newly promoted senior manager in a telecommunications organization was a talented engineer but a brute with his direct reports. His manager insisted he attend a week-long intensive management development program, and he returned—to the astonishment of many—transformed. Most people, particularly those in authority who interacted with him, were skeptical, yet astonished, at what indeed seemed like a total transformation. It was as though he became a born-again good-management disciple overnight. Not only did he preach about his own "conversion," but he also began to spread the gospel of management development to others at every opportunity. And transformed he was . . . for about five weeks after the program. As time wore on, he settled back into his old brutish patterns, first with his subordinates, then his peers. Finally, the veneer started to crack in the presence of his manager.

The First Step to Managing Client Resistance: Understand the Context

A change theorist puts the typical reaction to resistance this way:

One of the common mistakes made by managers when they encounter resistance is to become angry, frustrated, impatient or exasperated. . . . The problem with an emotional reaction is that it increases the probability that the resistance will intensify. . . . Remember that anger directed toward others is likely to

make them afraid and angry in return.⁴

When resistance is viewed as a natural reaction it can be seen as the first step toward adaptation. At its minimum, resistance represents energy that can at least be worked with and redirected. The strength of resistance can give consultants an estimate of the degree to which the change has touched on something meaningful to the client or perhaps the organization generally. Discovering what that valuable something is can be important for designing or amending the change strategy.

When confronted with client reactions that appear to reflect resistance, consultants might ask themselves the following questions:

Why has the resistance occurred at a particular point in the intervention or consulting engagement?

What is the client resisting and why might he or she be resisting it?

How has the client elected to show the resistance?

Is there any relation between the client's resistance behavior and what I know of him or her outside the organizational context?

Resistances involve all the psychological tools that protect us from experiences that we see as dangerous. Although we developed these defenses originally to protect us, they can become dysfunctional. Resistances do not disappear quickly, and it is important for the consultant to realize his or her success may hinge on identifying and actively managing the resistance over time. ■

Notes

1. Adams, Scott. 1996. *The Dilbert Principle*. New York: HarperBusiness, pp. 153, 200.
2. Freud, S. 1953. *Freud's Psycho-analytic Procedure*. Standard Edition, Vol. VII. London: Hogarth, pp. 257-268.
3. Manfred Kets de Vries is a management professor at INSEAD and a trained psychoanalyst. Consultants to senior managers may find much of his work of particular interest, particularly *The Neurotic Organization* (Jossey-Bass, 1984) and *Unstable at the Top* (New American Library, 1987).
4. Hultman. 1979. *The Path of Least Resistance*. Austin, Tx.: Learning Concepts.

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1997 Academy of Management Meeting Managerial Consultation Division

Call for Papers and Symposium Proposals

Program Theme: The Need for Joint Action

Submission Deadline: January 7, 1997

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Papers and symposium proposals on the theory, research, and practice of consultation might focus on research evaluating effectiveness, comparing consulting methodologies, or documenting what really happens in the consulting process; how to teach consulting or develop consulting skills; applications or client cases of consulting interventions; better understanding and integration of client perspectives; theory relevant to the consulting relationship and systematic intervention; special consulting issues of the 1990's, such as quality implementation, workforce diversity, reengineering, large-scale transformation, globalization, and downsizing; and consulting within specific areas such as strategy, HRD, and organizational change. The Division encourages case studies, assessments of consulting projects, philosophy and theory pieces, and quantitative and qualitative research.

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