

Why Employees Resist Change In The Workplace

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Abstract:

In any workplace, resistance to change is a typical human response and mindset. Employees frequently feel at ease with their routines, so any change can cause anxiety and uncertainty. Negative effects like lower productivity and higher absenteeism may result from ignoring this resistance.

When we, as humans hear the word resistance, one of our first instincts is to get defensive. Some businesses think that employees who are resistant to change are appalling and that we should "expel" them from our workplace because they are dangerous (Plaza, 2025). Organizational change is a systematic process and has advanced from being of partial relevance to being vital to their existence. Successful change management is critical for enhancing organizational performance, because it promotes employees' ingenuity, problem-solving, originality, retention, and efficiency. (Al Balushi, 2024).

The purpose of this article is to explain why employees resist organizational change and how change managers can reduce employee resistance. Furthermore, the article explains which factors lead organizations to implement change periodically. It also examines employee behavior during organizational change.

Key words: Change Resist, Decision Making, Rebellious Behavior, Transition, Employee Engagement

Introduction:

Resistance to change can be defined as the set of attitudes that workers in an organization begin to develop when they are forced into a process of changes at their workplaces, something that involves changing their habits and routine. Organizational change may be regarded as a source of uncertainty thus making it inevitable not to have some percentage of employees resisting or opposing changes. Thus, resistance to change in the workplace can be defined as employees' negative reactions across thought, feeling, and behavior toward planned change initiatives (Rehman et al, 2021). Resistance is therefore viewed as a multidimensional response in the management literature (Khaw, 2023). For example, one review described it as “the outcome of change recipients' cognitive and behavioral reactions” to change, yet, added to that the full picture also includes emotional reactions. In real situations, resistance takes place across three interrelated dimensions (Rehman et al., 2021).

Cognitive responses: Employees form negative beliefs or attitudes about the change. They may question its necessity or fear threats to their status, job security, or routines (Rehman et al, 2021).

Affective (emotional) responses: Workers experience emotions such as anxiety, fear, anger or frustration. For instance, they may feel uneasy about uncertainty or the loss of control that change brings. (Dael, 2025).

Behavioral responses: These thoughts and feelings often lead to actions that oppose the change. Employees might slow down implementation, reduce effort, or even openly sabotage the effort. Collectively, such negative attitudes and actions during change efforts are what literature refers to as employee resistance (Khaw et al, 2022).

Implications for Change Management

Conceptualizing resistance in cognitive, emotional and behavioral terms has important practical implications. Resistance is viewed as a major barrier to successful change: employees may “slow down the change process or terminate the change effort” entirely, making it a leading obstacle to new initiatives. (Cheraghi et al., 2023).

Change management research therefore emphasizes addressing the underlying concerns that fuel resistance. In practice, this means clear communication, participation and support to reduce anxiety and negative beliefs. As one review notes, change aversion often stems from employees' "fear of the unknown" and perceived loss of control, mdpi.com. By actively engaging employees and allaying their fears (e.g. through information sharing and involvement), managers can transform resistance from a roadblock into useful feedback and thus improve the chances of change success (Hubbart, 2023).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Organizational change refers to significant shifts within a company that influence the majority—or even all—of its workforce. These transformations can reshape the company's culture, systems, technology, or internal operations, ultimately altering the everyday work experience of employees. While some changes are carefully strategized, others may arise unexpectedly (Hasana et al., 2025).

Common examples of organizational change include:

- **Leadership transitions;** such as appointing a new general manager or department leader. Leadership changes often bring shifts in vision, strategy, and culture. New leaders may restructure teams, redefine priorities, or introduce fresh management styles. Challenges include employees experiencing uncertainty or resistance, especially if the new leader's approach differs significantly from their predecessor (Khaw et al., 2023).

- **Mergers or acquisitions;** involving the company. This is combining with or purchasing another company. The impact is that these changes can lead to integration of systems, staff, and cultures. They often aim to expand market reach, reduce competition, or gain new capabilities. However, challenges involve aligning values, managing redundancies, and maintaining morale during the transition (Errida & Lotfi, 2021).

- **Structural reorganization;** of departments or workflows, i.e., redefining departmental roles, reporting lines, or workflows. This can improve efficiency, reduce bottlenecks, and better align resources with strategic goals. Examples include flattening hierarchies or creating cross-functional teams. Yet, employees may need to adapt to new roles, responsibilities, or reporting structures, which can temporarily disrupt productivity (Khaw et al., 2023).

- **Adopting new technologies;** like moving from manual project management to an electronic project management system, implementing an AI platform, or integrating cloud-based solutions. Such technologies enhance collaboration, automate tasks, and improve data-driven decision-making. They can also foster innovation and scalability. However, this requires

training, change management, and sometimes overcoming resistance from staff who are accustomed to legacy systems (Hasana et al., 2025).

•**Revising business objectives;** to align with growth, such as shifting focus from acquiring leads to increasing upsells. This includes shifting strategic focus—e.g., from lead generation to customer retention or up-selling. The impact is aligning the organization with evolving market demands or growth opportunities. It may involve redefining KPIs, reallocating budgets, or retraining sales teams. A challenge could be ensuring all departments understand and support the new objectives, and adjusting performance metrics accordingly, which is time-consuming (Albrecht et al., 2022).

2.2 Causes of Employees' Resistance to Change in the Workplace

Resistance to change can arise from various sources, however, numerous researches identifies five core drivers:

1. Limited Understanding of the Change

A primary reason for resistance is employees not knowing why the change is happening. This often results from poor communication about the business rationale and a lack of clarity regarding how individual roles contribute to the change's success. Studies show that clear, consistent communication significantly reduces resistance by aligning employee perceptions with organizational goals (Smith & Lewis, 2021).

2. Shifts in Job Responsibilities

when a change affects an employee's role—such as increased workload, altered job duties, or new behavioral expectations—resistance tends to surface. Many employees may feel reluctant to adopt unfamiliar systems or technologies, especially if they don't see personal benefit. Research highlights that perceived threats to job security and role ambiguity are key predictors of resistance (Jones et al., 2022).

3. Anxiety About the Unknown

Uncertainty breeds fear. Concerns about job security, potential pay cuts, or the organization's future—often shaped by previous failed change efforts—can lead employees to resist new initiatives. Psychological safety and transparent leadership communication are critical to mitigating this anxiety (Kumar & Patel, 2023).

4. Lack of Trust in Leadership

Employees take cues from their managers and leaders. If those in leadership positions are skeptical or unsupportive of the change, it sets a negative tone. This lack of endorsement can

erode trust and discourage employees from embracing the transition. Empirical evidence links leadership trustworthiness directly to employee engagement during change (Garcia & Wong, 2020).

5. Being Left Out of the Decision-Making Process

When employees, particularly those on the front lines, are excluded from planning or decision-making, they may feel overlooked or threatened. Ensuring transparency and involving staff in shaping the change helps build buy-in and reduces resistance. Participative change management approaches have been shown to improve acceptance and reduce turnover intentions (Lee & Chen, 2024).

2.3 Negative Impact of employees' resistance to change in the workplace

1. Lower Level of Commitment

When employees disengage, they often withdraw from active participation. Silence, apathy, and lack of communication signal a drop in morale and loyalty. This can erode team cohesion and make it harder to rally support for new initiatives, leaving managers with limited feedback and reduced collaboration (Obina & Adenike, 2022).

2. Persistent Negativity

Resistant employees may become vocal critics, frequently complaining, spreading rumors, or using sarcasm to undermine change efforts. This negativity can poison the workplace atmosphere, lower team morale, and create a culture of skepticism that discourages others from embracing progress (Rehman et al., 2021).

3. Evasion of Responsibility

Avoidance behaviors—such as dodging new tasks or passing responsibilities to others—can stall implementation timelines. When employees refuse to engage with the change, it places extra pressure on more willing team members and disrupts workflow consistency (Alshahrani & Basahal, 2023).

4. Emotional Distress

Resistance often manifests emotionally, employees may feel sad, irritable, or even depressed, especially if they perceive the change as threatening or destabilizing. This emotional strain can affect interpersonal relationships, reduce motivation, and lead to burnout (Rehman et al., 2021).

5. Decline in Performance

As resistance grows, productivity and efficiency tend to drop. Employees may take more sick days, make more mistakes, or disengage from quality standards. This not only affects individual output but can also impact customer satisfaction and overall business performance (Obina & Adenike, 2022).

6. Struggle for Control

Some employees respond to change by trying to reassert their influence—asking excessive questions, challenging decisions, or attempting to steer the process. While curiosity can be constructive, this behavior may slow down implementation and create tension between staff and leadership (Rehman et al., 2021).

7. Creation of Barriers

Resistant individuals may actively obstruct progress by making excuses, questioning the validity of the change, or sowing doubt among peers. These actions can fracture trust within teams and derail momentum, especially if others begin to second-guess the initiative (Alshahrani & Basahal, 2023).

8. Rebellious Behavior

In extreme cases, resistance turns into open defiance. Employees may provoke conflict, resist directives, or even celebrate setbacks as a form of protest. This undermines leadership authority and can lead to a toxic work environment that jeopardizes long-term success (Obina & Adenike, 2022).

2.4 Approaches to Address Employees' Resistance to Change in the Workplace

1. Open and Consistent Communication

Clear communication is vital when navigating change. Before rolling out a new change, leaders should ensure that employees fully grasp and be aware of the reasons behind its introduction (WalkMe Team, 2025), the advantages it offers to both the organization and individuals, and what their roles will be during the transition. Additionally, maintaining a steady stream of dialogue allows team members to express concerns and ask questions, fostering trust and transparency (Men & Yue, 2022; By et al., 2023).

2. Engage Employees in the Process

Early involvement of staff can significantly reduce pushback. When employees participate in planning and execution, they feel acknowledged and are more likely to support the initiative. For example, forming a pilot team to trial a new Information System, collect feedback, and refine the rollout plan can create a sense of ownership. These participants can also become advocates, sharing their positive experiences with the wider team (Smollan, 2021).

3. Provide Adequate Training

A common barrier to change is the fear of not having the necessary skills. Offering practical, hands-on training sessions helps employees gain confidence and competence with new systems or methods (Vakola & Petrou, 2020).

4. Emphasize the Advantages

The organization shall demonstrate the real-world benefits of the change—such as improved efficiency, reduced workload, or enhanced work quality; this can help shift employee perceptions. When employees see how the change positively impacts their daily tasks, they are more likely to embrace and appreciate it (Stouten et al., 2023).

5. Continue Support and Celebrate Progress

Support should not stop once the change is in place. Continuing assistance, like technical assistance and refresher courses, keeps employees engaged and capable. In addition, top management acknowledgement of achievements and celebrating milestones reinforces progress and encourages employees to get on board through positive reinforcement (Hameed et al., 2021; By et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

This article adopts a systematic literature review to synthesize existing academic research (Mengist, 2020) on employee resistance to change in an organizational context. The main aim is to systematically review, aggregate and critique the current theories, antecedents and mitigation mechanisms from academic studies.

The process starts with a systematic identification and selection of articles. Relevant peer-reviewed papers will be found on the main academic databases i.e. Google Scholar, Web of Science and EBSCOhost. Terms and search strings including “resistance to change”, “organizational change management”, “employee resistance to change in the workplace” and “change readiness” will serve to select heterogeneous literature sources. The inclusion criteria will prioritize empirical studies, seminal theoretical papers, and recent reviews published within the last two decades to ensure both foundational understanding and contemporary relevance.

Following collection, the selected articles will undergo a thematic analysis. This involves a systematic process of coding the literature to identify recurring themes, patterns, and contradictions. Key areas of focus will include: the psychological underpinnings of resistance (e.g., fear of the unknown, loss of control); contextual factors (e.g., organizational culture, quality of communication); and the evolution of resistance from a perceived individual dysfunction to a potentially rational response to flawed change processes. Finally, the methodology involves a critical synthesis to construct a consistent narrative. This stage does not merely summarize findings; nevertheless, it evaluates the strength of evidence, identifies gaps in the current research landscape, and explores the interplay between different factors. By integrating perspectives from various studies, this review aims to develop a multi-faceted conceptual framework that delineates the complex antecedents and consequences of resistance, eventually providing a consolidated knowledge base for both academic inquiry and practical application in change management.

4. Analysis of the Literature Review

Organizational change has become an inevitable feature of contemporary business environments, and the reviewed text provides a comprehensive overview of how employees respond to such transitions. By examining the nature of change, the causes of resistance, its negative consequences, and strategies for overcoming it, the review highlights both the challenges and opportunities inherent in managing workplace transformation.

The importance of this review lies in its recognition that resistance to change is not simply an act of defiance but a predictable human response to uncertainty and disruption. The identification of five core drivers—limited understanding, shifts in job responsibilities, anxiety about the unknown, lack of trust in leadership, and exclusion from decision-making—underscores the central role of communication, trust, and participation in shaping employee reactions. This framing is valuable because it shifts the focus away from blaming employees

and instead emphasizes systemic shortcomings in leadership and organizational strategy. In doing so, the review positions resistance as a signal of deeper organizational issues rather than a mere obstacle to being suppressed.

Equally significant is the discussion of the negative impacts of resistance. The review demonstrates how disengagement, negativity, avoidance, emotional distress, and even open rebellion can erode morale, productivity, and organizational cohesion. By linking individual psychological responses to broader organizational outcomes, the text illustrates that resistance is not a marginal issue but a central determinant of performance and long-term success. This perspective reinforces the urgency of addressing resistance proactively rather than reactively.

The strategies proposed to mitigate resistance; open communication, employee engagement, training; emphasizing advantages, and ongoing support are practical and align with established change management models such as Lewin's Change Theory and Kotter's 8-Step Process. These approaches highlight the importance of building trust, fostering ownership, and equipping employees with the skills and confidence needed to adapt. The emphasis on celebrating progress is particularly noteworthy, as it reflects the role of positive reinforcement in sustaining momentum during periods of uncertainty.

Despite these strengths, the review reveals several gaps that limit its depth. First, it lacks explicit theoretical grounding. While the causes and solutions are clearly articulated, they are not connected to broader organizational behavior or psychological frameworks such as social identity theory, psychological contract theory, or transformational leadership. Anchoring the discussion in such theories would provide greater analytical rigor. Second, the review treats resistance as a universal phenomenon without considering contextual variability across industries, cultures, or organizational sizes. Resistance in a multinational corporation, for example, may differ significantly from that in a small local enterprise (Klaus, Blanton, & Wingreen, 2015). Third, the review is largely descriptive and does not reference empirical studies or case evidence, which weakens its academic credibility. Finally, resistance is framed exclusively as negative, overlooking the possibility that it can serve as constructive feedback, prompting leaders to refine strategies and address overlooked concerns.

Future research and practice should therefore focus on integrating theoretical perspectives, examining contextual differences, and incorporating empirical evidence to validate claims. Moreover, exploring the constructive dimensions of resistance could provide a more balanced understanding of its role in organizational change. By reframing resistance as both a challenge

and a potential resource, organizations can design more inclusive and adaptive change strategies.

5. Conclusion

Organizational change is an inevitable aspect of modern business, driven by evolving markets, technological advancements, and strategic realignments. While such transformations can enhance efficiency, competitiveness, and long-term sustainability, they also present significant challenges for employees and leaders alike. Resistance to change often stems from uncertainty, lack of trust, or exclusion from decision-making, which can manifest in reduced commitment, negativity, and even open defiance. These reactions not only hinder the success of change initiatives but also risk damaging morale, productivity, and organizational cohesion.

To overcome these barriers, organizations must adopt proactive and inclusive strategies. Clear and consistent communication ensures employees understand the rationale and benefits of change, while active involvement fosters ownership and reduces skepticism. Training and ongoing support equip staff with the skills and confidence to adapt, and celebrating milestones reinforces progress and builds momentum. Ultimately, successful change management requires balancing organizational goals with employee needs, creating an environment of trust, transparency, and collaboration.

By addressing resistance thoughtfully and strategically, organizations can transform potential obstacles into opportunities for growth. In doing so, they not only achieve smoother transitions but also cultivate a resilient workforce capable of embracing innovation and sustaining long-term success.

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