# Resistance - Working With It

**What is it and how can it help me?**

You may have a great idea for change, but all too often that idea is blocked by resistance from key stakeholders. This tool helps you recognise the different levels of resistance and explains how you can overcome this barrier to change.

Resistance itself is not the primary reason why changes fail: it is the reaction to resistance that creates the problem. In other words, if your response is ineffectual or inadequate when people resist a new initiative, it is this which hinders the change.

**What is resistance?**

Resistance is any force that slows or stops movement. We all resist things that go against our best interests - it is part of our instinctive protective mechanism. People resist in response to something: often they don't see it as resistance, it is simply survival.   
  
[Rick Maurer](http://beyondresistance.com/) identified three levels of resistance:

1. Level 1 resistance relates to information: a lack of, confusion over or disagreement with key information
2. Level 2 resistance is an emotional and physiological reaction to change based on fear of loss, incompetence or abandonment
3. These levels are explained further in [understanding resistance](http://www.institute.nhs.uk/quality_and_service_improvement_tools/quality_and_service_improvement_tools/resistance_-_understanding_it.html).
4. Level 3 resistance goes beyond the immediate situation. It may be deeply entrenched and can also encompass personal, cultural, religious and racial differences

**When does it work best?**

You will need to transform resistance into commitment if your planned changes and improvements are to have maximum chance of success. This guide helps you start that process by understanding the causes of resistance and how to manage them.

**How to use it**

Even the best plans can derail. Conditions change: varying market forces, new directives from headquarters, changes in personnel and so on. When this happens, resistance to change can take over. You may find managing organisational change especially challenging during this stage.   
  
**Three critical things to do when resistance takes over**

1. Spot resistance early and in its many subtle forms. Gather evidence to determine if the potential derailment is caused by technical, financial or human factors - these are the most common sources of resistance to change. If you can identify the source, you should be able to avoid many of the problems that come with change.
2. Find ways to discover why things are going off track. If you make incorrect judgements, you risk making people more frustrated or wasting valuable time.
3. Identify strategies you can use to turn opposition and reluctance into support.

**How to get commitment instead of resistance**   
When asked why so many major changes in organisations failed, executives said that resistance was the primary reason. Therefore, if you are serious about creating a shift from scepticism to support for change - or if you want to minimise opposition before it occurs, you must understand the nature of resistance.

When dealing with resistance, your strategy must match the level of resistance you are facing.   
  
**How to work effectively with level 1 resistance**   
To deal with level 1 resistance, you are aiming to give people all the information they need through newsletters, presentations, discussions, e-mails, memos and videos.  Ensure that they understand the proposed change, see ideas from their perspective and understand how the change will impact on them.   
  
As the improvement lead, you need to give people a chance to engage with the information and reflect on what they hear. Allow them the opportunity of making a contribution to the idea or to warn of potential pitfalls. In meetings, give people a chance to take you on and argue with you - make sure that you go into these meetings willing to be influenced.

* After making a presentation to staff, offer them a chance to talk with you and give their opinions
* Hold town hall meetings with a cross-section of the organisation. Include time for people to ask questions and give their input
* Build in ways to report back to people explaining how your thinking has been influenced by what they had to say. You don't need to agree with everything you hear, but you do owe it to people to explain why you chose the course you did

**How to work effectively with level 2 resistance**   
Level 2 resistance is an emotional reaction to the new idea: in short, people are afraid. They fear that with this change they will lose control over their work, lose respect, become overwhelmed or that they may even lose their jobs.   
  
Typical level 1 strategies are insufficient for dealing with level 2 resistance. You need to engage people in ways that address their fears. To move beyond this wall of resistance, don't battle it - embrace it.  Listen to those who resist change and try to understand how they feel and why they feel that way. Then try to find common ground, incorporating their concerns.   
  
Touchstones were stones that allowed you to test the purity of gold and silver. Take this touchstone test to see if your strategies address level 2 concerns.   
 **The Touchstone Test**

1. **Build strong working relationships.** Many changes in organisations burn bridges in the process. Although the current change may be implemented, you could have a difficult time gaining support for future changes if your strategies have actually created resistance. Do you build bridges with those who have a stake in the outcome? Do you involve these people in creating goals and plans for the change? If not, you may be putting a new initiative at risk.
2. **Maintain a clear focus**. When people attack your ideas, it's easy to lose sight of your original goals. Ensure that you keep your goal in mind whilst paying attention to the concerns of those who have a stake in the outcome. If you focus only on your goal, you will miss mounting resistance. If you concentrate only on the opposition, you will never know when you have enough support to move ahead.
3. **Embrace resistance.**  You cannot work through resistance without opening yourself up to those opposing change. Embracing resistance encourages people to talk about their feelings and helps you get to the root of their concern. When you are open to learning more about another person's perspective, you can find common ground and discover ways to transform the negative energy of resistance into positive support for change.
4. **Listen with an open mind.**  People who fear they have something to lose are naturally reluctant to share their questions and concerns. People tell us the truth when they believe we are interested in them. Create a climate of trust and openness by making a commitment to listen to concerns with an open mind. Be willing to tell the truth: honesty can disarm resistance.
5. **Stay calm to stay engaged.**  Few leaders are willing to open themselves to a deluge of criticism: that's one reason why we avoid those who resist us. While listening to attacks on your ideas can be very stressful, staying calm and relaxed will help keep you centred on the issue at hand. As people raise questions about your position, listen attentively and draw them out. Do not attack or give in to them. Instead, use what you have learned to begin seeking common ground.
6. **Join with the resistance.**  It is important to seek a neutral zone that attempts to include the interests of all groups. Asking three questions will help you do this: 'What's in it for me? What's in it for you? What's in it for us?'. As people answer these questions, especially the last one, listen for common fears and interests. Build on these similarities to find a solution which addresses the concern of all parties. By doing so, you can transform opposition into support.

**How to work effectively with level 3 resistance**Level 3 is the deepest, most firmly entrenched form of opposition to change. This occurs when people are actually opposing you, rather than the change itself. There can be various reasons for this: you may have a troubled history, conflicting values or it may simply be because of what you represent (ie union versus management, differences in race, class or culture).

1. **Continually work on building relationships.** Rumours and assumptions can derail negotiations instantly, so keep doing everything you can to build trust.
2. **Begin small.** Start by working on issues where all sides see a benefit and a possible mutual win. Some corporations and unions have weakened level 3 issues by working on areas that were important, but not at the centre of the change. For example, safety concerns are common ground issues.
3. **Candid conversation is vital.** Learn the skills of dialogue: talk and listen.
4. **Support yourself.** It is easy to get defensive and blow it, but you need to be prepared to engage others. Thorough preparation, sleep, exercise and allowing sufficient time to hold the meeting can all help. Breathing exercises can also help you remain calm before tense encounters.
5. **Involve people in changes that affect them.** Real Time Strategic Change is an example of one approach. Form a planning group made up of a cross-section of stakeholders and devise a plan. Next, hold a meeting for up to 500 people to dissect this plan and create a new plan which meets a wide variety of interests. See ‘Real Time Strategic Change' by Robert Jacobs or ‘Whole Scale Change' by Dannemiller Tyson Associates, both published by Berrett-Koehler.  Whichever approach you choose must be done in collaboration with the people who oppose you. Lack of trust is the major reason why they resist. Trying to inflict any strategy, no matter how well intended, will fail.
6. **Be prepared for setbacks.** Working with level 3 is extremely difficult. No single meeting will turn things around: trust is difficult to build and easy to destroy. For example, if you forget to invite someone in on a conference call due to an oversight, it could destroy weeks of good work between you. It is possible to work with level 3, it just takes time. As Woody Allen once said, ‘The lions might lie down with the lambs, but the lambs won't get much sleep.'
7. **Be prepared to walk away.** There will be times when the risk or energy required isn't worth it. In these instances, have the courage to walk away.

**What next?**

Once you have turned resistance into commitment you will be able to move forward with your implementation plans. After that, you will need to consider how to maintain commitment, and then how to set about evaluating the impact of the changes.