

# Quality info

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## Six Layers of Resistance

Whenever we wish to bring about a change in an organization, we are likely to face six layers of resistance. It is based on the work of Eliyahu Goldratt, who is now no more. Goldratt was the originator of a body of work known as the “Theory of Constraints.” His bestselling novel, *The Goal* (North River Press, 2014 reprint), should be essential reading for anyone in business, not just manufacturing.

The technical aspects of change within an organization are often rather simple. The complicating factors and the drivers behind failures usually can be traced back to a failure to adequately work with people to overcome in each of them the six layers of resistance. Whenever we are faced with a change, we all work through these six layers, starting at layer 0 and—if the change is to be succeed—moving up to layer 5. When people remain at a middle level of this process, they resist the change that is being developed and can cause the program or project to flounder.

Change within an organization is difficult and time-consuming. It often fails because there has been no effort to work through the change process with the individuals involved in the change, and advance their personal thinking to overcome their resistance to the changes desired.

“If you want enemies, try to change something.”  
—Woodrow Wilson



## **Layer 0: 'Why change?'**

It's easy to get people into the lifeboats if they can see the ship is sinking. Somewhat harder is to get them to pay attention and practice the maneuver when the weather is clear and there is no sign of any emergency.

"Why change?" is the first and foremost question that is likely to be asked whenever there is a proposal for a change. Individuals will not involve themselves in moving away from their current situation unless there is a compelling reason to do so. These reasons will vary from person to person. One person may be sufficiently inspired or concerned by the issue to agree that there's a need for change, whereas another person can hear the same explanation but, due to his/her different experiences and motivational needs, arrive at an entirely different conclusion.

If a person does not see that there is a need to change, it is basically impossible and a waste of time to proceed any further down the path of introducing changes or discussing what those changes could be. Likewise with a group, there must be a minimum of a critical mass of opinion leaders who have come to the conclusion that a change away from the current situation is desirable. The conversation will need to continue until agreement is reached that there is a need to change. When that happens, layer 0 has been passed through.

## **Layer 1: Disagreeing on the nature of the problem**

"When both logic and intuition agree, you are always right."  
—Unknown

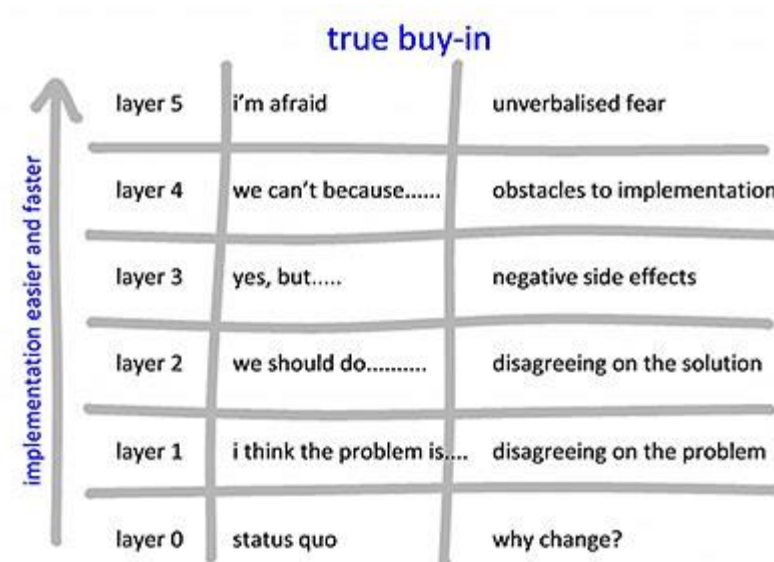
Once agreement has been reached that the current situation can't continue, the next stage of resistance to be faced is a lack of consensus and agreement on the nature of the problem that is causing the current situation to exist and remain. Most people will have experienced a variety of negative effects due to the current situation and have an equally diverse set of opinions as to the causes of the problems.

One organization I worked with had definitely agreed that the situation needed to change. The sales group blamed the problem on manufacturing. The manufacturing group saw the problem as being poor sales forecasting and procurement policies. The purchasing group was usually blamed by everyone. Engineering thought the problem was a lack of people to develop new models and the inability of marketing to make a decision in a timely manner.

This is just a snapshot of the generalized disagreement within the organization. When you reach this point, it is necessary to perform an analysis of the situation between the groups. The outcome will be the discovery of a root cause that creates the major symptoms that people are experiencing, or exposes a conflict between well-intentioned people who are forced to behave in such a way as to cause problems within the organization. Developing this analysis is the methodology to build buy-in and support to help people move through layer 1.

So far, we have moved through the initial and often overlooked layers of resistance: first, why change; and second, how to overcome disagreement on the nature of the problem. Here we move on to the next two layers, namely, disagreeing on the solution and undesirable side effects.

## Layer 2: Disagreeing on the nature of a solution



It is more important to know where you are going than to get there quickly. Don't mistake activity for achievement.

Just as there are many opinions about the problem that is being experienced, there are usually just as many opinions as to what should be done about it. If layer 1 has been transited successfully, the range of opinions about the solution will have narrowed substantially. However, there will still be many characteristics of a good solution that different people desire.

The objective of this phase of the analysis is to improve the solution as it stands so that it increases the number of desirable features that will be delivered by its implementation. This builds buy-in for the solution among the people involved and affected.

## Layer 3: The proposed solution has undesirable side effects

“The chief cause of problems is solutions.”  
—Sevareid’s Law

Layer 3 is the domain of the cynic, the saboteur, the disillusioned, and the disenfranchised. By this stage you have agreed that change is necessary, you have agreed on the problem, and have discovered a solution that will solve that problem. From the back of the room a voice is raised. The long-serving and quiet icon of the department gains everyone’s attention. This person has survived numerous administrations and change programs. Everyone turns to listen to him as he says, “That’s all very well, *but...*,” and out comes a side effect of your solution that is so

damaging that it will kill the solution that has been developed and cuts down all the great work that has been done so far.

But no! Layer 3 thrives on the input of the naysayer and the skeptic. We need their skepticism to save us from our enthusiasm. The surfacing of the negative side effects of our solution must be encouraged and supported, not suppressed. Suppression will split the group, and may well mean that valid concerns aren't expressed and dealt with.

Our objective here is to have everyone express the things that can go wrong with the solution, and then be actively involved in finding additional activities that can eliminate the possible negative side effects.

By doing this we strengthen the solution and build continued buy-in by all the people involved. Examining these issues while the solution is still theoretical is powerful because it's easier to deal with problems when they are abstract rather than when you are under pressure halfway through an implementation. After this useful discussion about possible negative side effects, layer 3 is passed through.

Now let us look at the final two layers, obstacles to implementing the proposed solution, and un verbalized fear. We are close to achieving true buy-in, but hurdles still remain that must be diligently, thoroughly, and supportively crossed.

#### **Layer 4: Obstacles to implementing the proposed solution**

"Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off the goal."  
—Hanna More

In layer 4 we turn toward the implementation of the solution. We may all agree and support what needs to be done; however, there can be barriers from external sources or other areas that we perceive as preventing implementation of our solution. Once again we want to encourage everyone in the group to raise any possible obstacle to implementation, and for the group to design a solution to overcoming the obstacle. Our goal is to have the group so confident in the complete and detailed solution plan that they can't wait to implement it.

A group I worked with was prevented from implementing a solution because of the way their performance was measured. The performance measures that were in place forced them to take the exact opposite actions from those that were best for the business. This was raised as an obstacle, and the performance measures (that were outside their control) were changed. Measurements that relate to some form of efficiency are notorious for causing this sort of problem. In this case, measurements were changed, buy-in was achieved, and the solution progressed.

#### **Layer 5: Un verbalized fear**

"It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare. It is because we do not dare they are difficult."  
—Seneca

Layer 5 is a complex layer and not always encountered. Sometimes there remains a fear or concern that has not been verbalized. In that case, it's necessary to connect with the individual involved and step through the layers of resistance once more to discover the source of the un verbalized fear. You can then help that person express and deal with the concern. Watch for someone saying "yes," even as their body language and behaviors say "no."

### **True buy-in**

Ownership is the essential transition point for a solution to move from theoretically interesting to achieving complete buy-in by the individuals and groups involved. Throughout the analysis and discussion to explore and move through the layers of resistance, we are progressively building buy-in, and at some point people move to owning the solution. Implementation becomes much easier and faster the greater the level of buy-in from the people affected.

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