

Forces for and Resistance to Organizational Change

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ABSTRACT

Organizational change is the movement of an organization away from its present state and toward some desired future state to increase its effectiveness. The education environment is constantly changing, and the school organization must adapt to these forces in order to remain relevant and effective. In this article, I examine the forces for and resistance to organizational change. Lewin's force-field theory of change serves as a useful model in understanding the change process.

The role of the school leader is both intense and diverse. Paradoxically, the only constant in the school leader's ever increasing responsibilities is that of change – change in the physical environment, change in the curriculum, change in faculty and staff, change in the student body, unexpected change, and most importantly change that can bring about vast improvements in a school district, community college, or university. The school leader must be the primary catalyst in order for the change to be both positive and lasting (Fullan, 2010; Hargreaves, 2011; Marzano & Waters, 2010).

Organizational change is the movement of an organization away from its present state and toward some desired future state to increase its effectiveness. Why does an organization need to change the way it performs its activities? The education environment is constantly changing, and the school organization must adapt to these forces in order to remain relevant and effective (Blankstein, 2010; Creemers, 2011; Smylie, 2010). Figure 1 lists the most important forces for and resistance to change that confront school organizations and its leaders.

Forces for Change	Resistance to Change
<i>External Forces</i>	Uncertainty
Marketplace	Concern over personal loss
Government laws and regulations	Group resistance
Technology	Dependence
Labor markets	Trust in administration
Economic changes	Awareness of weaknesses in the proposed
<i>Internal Forces</i>	change
Administrative processes	
People problems	

Figure 1. Forces for and resistance to organizational change.

Forces for Change

Given a choice, most school organizations prefer stability to change. Why? Because the more predictable and routine activities are, the higher the level of efficiency that can be obtained. Thus, the status quo is preferred in many cases. However, schools are not static, but continuously change in response to a variety of forces coming from both inside and outside the school (Duke, 2011). For school leaders, the challenge is to anticipate and direct change processes so that school performance is improved (Szarlan, 2011). Several important factors in each of these categories (internal and external forces) will now be considered (Fullan, 2011; Hargreaves, 2011; Spector, 2011).

External Forces

The external forces for change originate in the school's environment. They include the marketplace, government laws and regulations, technology, labor markets, and economic changes.

Marketplace. The marketplace, in recent years, has affected schools by introducing competition both from within a school district in the form of magnet schools, learning choice schools, and the like; and from outside the school district including private schools, store-front schools, and home instruction (Ludvigsen, 2011).

Government laws and regulations. Government laws and regulations are a frequent impetus for change. As a case in point, strict enforcement of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission regulations cause many school districts to examine carefully their hiring, promotion, and pay policies for women and minorities (Robinson, 2010). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Public Law 107-110) has had a significant impact on the operation of public schools throughout the country.

Technology. Technological innovations have created the need for change in schools (D'Agustino, 2011). Computers have made possible high-speed data processing and retrieval of information and have created the need for new positions.

Labor markets. The fluctuation of labor markets forces school leaders to initiate change. For instance, the education, talents, and attitudes of potential teachers play an important role in a school's effectiveness. Changes in these facets of the labor force can lead to a shortage or a surplus of qualified teachers.

Economic changes. Economic changes affect schools as well. During periods of recession, inflation, or downturns in the local or national economy, the attitudes and morale of some staff members suffer, which may hinder school performance (Brimley & Garfield, 2009).

Internal Forces

Pressures in the internal environment of the school district/school can also stimulate change. The two most significant internal pressures for change come from administrative processes and people problems.

Administrative processes. Processes that act as pressures for change include communications, decision making, leadership, and motivational strategies, to name only a few. Breakdowns or problems in any of these processes can create pressures for change. Communications may be inadequate; decisions may be of poor quality; leadership may be inappropriate for the situation; and staff motivation may be nonexistent. Such processes reflect breakdowns or problems in the school district/school and may reflect the need for change (Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly, & Konopaske, 2012).

People problems. Some symptoms of people problems are poor performance levels of teachers and students; high absenteeism of teachers or students; high dropout rates of students; high teacher turnover; poor school-community relations, poor management-union relations; and low levels of staff morale and job satisfaction (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). A teacher's strike, numerous employee complaints, and the filing of grievances are some tangible signs of problems in the internal environment (Alexander & Alexander, 2009). These factors provide a signal to school leaders that change is necessary. In addition, internal pressures for change occur in response to organizational changes that are designed to deal with pressures for change exerted by the external environment.

Resistance to Change

Forces for change are a recurring feature of school life. It is also inevitable that change will be resisted, at least to some extent by both school leaders and staff. There is a human tendency to resist change, because it forces people to adopt new ways of doing things. In order to cope with this recurring problem, school leaders must understand why people resist change. The most powerful impediments to change include uncertainty, concern over personal loss, group resistance, dependence, trust in administration, and awareness of weaknesses in the proposed change (Fullan, 2009; Spector, 2011).

Uncertainty

Teachers may resist change because they are worried about how their work and lives will be affected by the proposed change. Even if they have some appreciable dissatisfaction with their present jobs, they have learned what their range of responsibilities are and what their administrator's reaction to their behavior will be in certain situations. Any change creates some potential uncertainties.

Concern over Personal Loss

Appropriate change should benefit the school district/school as a whole, but for some staff members, the cost of change in terms of lost power, prestige, salary, quality of work, or other benefits will not be sufficiently offset by the rewards of change. Organization members may feel change will diminish their decision-making authority, accessibility to information, autonomy, and the inherent characteristics of the job.

Group Resistance

Groups establish norms of behavior and performance that are communicated to members. This communication establishes the boundaries of expected behaviors. Failure to comply with such norms usually results in sanctions against group members by the group. If school leaders initiate changes that are viewed as threatening to the staffs' norms, they are likely to meet with resistance. The more cohesive the staff is, the greater their resistance to change will be. This may explain partially what causes wildcat strikes by teachers when school districts introduce changes without proper notification and preparation.

Dependence

All humans begin life in a dependent state. Thus, dependence is instilled in all people to a certain extent. Dependency, in and of itself, is not all bad; but if carried to extremes, dependency on others can lead to resistance to change. For instance, staff members who are highly dependent on their leader for feedback on their performance will probably not adopt any new methods or strategies unless the leader personally endorses their behavior and indicates how the proposed changes will improve the staff member's performance.

Trust in Administration

Schools vary substantially in the degree to which organization members trust the leader. On the one hand, if a change is proposed when trust is low, a natural first reaction is to resist it. On the other hand, when trust is high, organization members are more likely to support a proposed change. Further, under conditions of distrust staff members often resist changes, even when they are understood and they can benefit from them.

Awareness of Weaknesses in the Proposed Change

Organization members may resist change because they are aware of potential problems in the proposed change. If staff express their reasons for resistance to the leader clearly along with adequate substantiation, this form of resistance can be beneficial to the school district/school. Leaders can use these suggestions to make their change proposals more effective.

Lewin's Force-Field Theory of Change

To better understand resistance to change, Kurt Lewin (1951) developed the concept of *force-field analysis*. He looks on a level of behavior within a school organization not as a static custom but as a dynamic balance of forces working in opposite directions within the organization. He believes that we should think about any change situation in terms of driving forces or factors acting to change the current condition (forces for change) and resisting forces or factors acting to inhibit change (resistance to change). These forces may originate in the internal or external environment of the organization or in the behavior of the school leader.

School leaders must play an active role in initiating change and in attempting to reduce resistance to change. School leaders can think of the current condition in a school organization as an equilibrium that is the result of driving forces and resisting forces working against each other. School leaders must assess the change potential and resistance and attempt to change the balance of forces so that there will be movement toward a desired condition. There are three ways school leaders can do this: increasing the driving forces, reducing the resisting forces, or considering new driving forces.

Lewin points out that increasing one set of forces without decreasing the other set of forces will increase tension and conflict in the organization. Reducing the other set of

forces may reduce the amount of tension. Although increasing driving forces is sometimes effective, it is usually better to reduce the resisting forces because increasing driving forces often tends to be offset by increased resistance. Put another way, when we push people, they are likely to push back. Figure 2 illustrates the two sets of forces discussed earlier: forces for change and resistance to change. These are the types of situations that school leaders face and must work with on a daily basis when attempting to effect change.

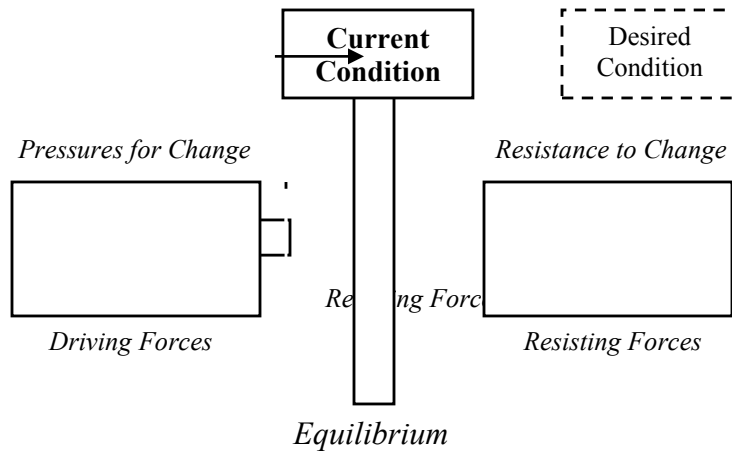


Figure 2. Lewin's force-field theory of change.

As Figure 2 depicts, change results when an imbalance occurs between the ratio of driving forces and resisting forces. Such an imbalance alters the current condition (*equilibrium*)—it is hoped in the direction planned by the school leader—into a new and desired condition. Once the new, desired condition is reached, the opposing forces are again brought into equilibrium. An imbalance may occur through a change in the velocity of any force, a change in the direction of a force, or the introduction of a new force.

Moreover, change involves a sequence of organizational processes that occurs over time. Lewin suggests this process typically requires three steps: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing.

Unfreezing. This step usually means reducing the forces acting to keep the organization in its current condition. *Unfreezing* might be accomplished by introducing new information that points out inadequacies in the current state or by decreasing the strength of current values, attitudes, and behaviors. Crises often stimulate unfreezing. Examples of crises are significant increases in the student dropout rate; dramatic enrollment declines; demographic shifts in population within a school district/school; a sudden increase in staff or leader turnover; a costly lawsuit; and an unexpected teacher strike. Unfreezing may occur without crises as well. Climate surveys, financial data, and enrollment projections can be used to determine problem areas in a school and initiate change to alleviate problems before crises erupt.

Moving. Once the organization is unfrozen, it can be changed by *moving*. This step usually involves the development of new values, attitudes, and behaviors through internalization, identification, or change in structure. Some changes may be minor and involve a few members—such as changes in recruitment and selection procedures—and others may be major, involving many participants. Examples of the latter include a new evaluation system, restructuring of jobs and duties performed by staff, or restructuring the school district, which necessitates relocating faculty to different school sites within the system.

Refreezing. The final step in the change process involves stabilizing the change at a new quasi-stationary equilibrium, which is called *refreezing*. Changes in school culture, changes in staff norms, changes in school policy, or modifications in school structure often accomplish this.

Overcoming Resistance to Change

There are a number of specific ways that resistance to change may be overcome. Six of the most popular and frequently used approaches to overcome resistance to change include the following: education and communication, participation and involvement, facilitation and support, negotiation and agreement, manipulation and co-optation, and explicit and implicit coercion (Anderson, 2011; Duke, 2011; Harvey, 2010).

Education and Communication

Resistance can be reduced when school leaders communicate with organization members to help them see the need for change as well as the logic behind it. This can be achieved through face-to-face discussions, formal group presentations, or special reports or publications. The approach works providing the source of resistance is inadequate communication and that leader-member relations are characterized by mutual trust. If trust does not exist, the change is unlikely to succeed.

Participation and Involvement

Organization members who participate in planning and implementing a change are less likely to resist it. Prior to making a change, leaders can allow those who oppose the change to express their view on the change, indicate potential problems, and suggest modifications. Such participant involvement can reduce resistance, obtain commitment, and increase the quality of the change decision.

Facilitation and Support

It is important for leaders to manifest supportive and facilitative leadership behaviors when change is being implemented. This type of leader behavior includes listening to organization member's ideas, being approachable, and using member's ideas

that have merit. Supportive leaders go out of their way to make the work environment more pleasant and enjoyable. For example, difficult changes may require staff development to acquire new skills necessary to implement the change. Such training will likely diminish resistance to the change.

Negotiation and Agreement

Leaders can neutralize potential or actual resistance by providing incentives for cooperation. For example, during collective bargaining between the school board and various employee unions, certain concessions can be given to employees in exchange for support of a new program desired by school leaders. Such concessions may include salary increases, bonuses, or more union representation in decision making. School leaders can also use standard rewards such as recognition, increased responsibility, praise, and status symbols.

Manipulation and Cooptation

Manipulation occurs when school leaders choose to be selective about who gets what information and how much information, how accurate the information is, and when to disseminate the information to increase the chance that change will be successful. Cooptation involves giving the leaders of a resistance group (e.g., teachers or other staff members who represent their work group) a key role in the change decision. The leaders' advice is sought, not to arrive at a better decision, but to get their endorsement. Both manipulation and cooptation are inexpensive ways to influence potential resisters to accept change, but these techniques can backfire if the targets become aware they are being tricked. Once discovered, the leader's credibility may suffer drastically.

Explicit and Implicit Coercion

When other approaches have failed, coercion can be used as a last resort. Some changes require immediate implementation. And change initiators may have considerable power. Such instances lend themselves more readily to the use of coercion to gain compliance to proposed changes. Organization members can be threatened with job loss, decreased promotional opportunities, salary freeze (this technique is used infrequently in public schools), or a job transfer. There are, however, negative effects of using coercion including frustration, fear, revenge, and alienation, which in turn may lead to poor performance, dissatisfaction, and turnover.

Conclusion

Both external and internal forces can create the need for change in school organizations. These include factors such as the marketplace, government laws and regulations, technology, labor markets, economic changes, administrative processes, and people problems. Organization members often resist change because of the uncertainty it

creates, concern over personal loss, group norms, the need for dependence, trust in the leader, and awareness of weaknesses in the proposed change. Force-field analysis can help school leaders understand resistance to change. School leaders must encourage driving forces for change and reduce resisting forces to change. The change process also passes through three stages: refreezing, moving, and unfreezing. School leaders also can use specific tactics for overcoming resistance to change including education and communication, participation and involvement, facilitation and support, negotiation and agreement, manipulation and co-optation, and explicit and implicit coercion.

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