

*Resistance and the Background Conversations of Change**

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* While a range of sources are referenced throughout this article, we would like to make special mention of Landmark Education Corporation since the particular configuration of information is found in the work of Landmark, without which this paper would not have been possible.

Resistance and the Background Conversations of Change

Abstract

Resistance to change has generally been understood as a result of personal experiences and assessments about the reliability of others. Accordingly, attempts are made to alter these factors in order to win support and overcome resistance. But this understanding ignores resistance as a socially constructed reality in which people are responding more to the background conversations in which the change is being initiated than to the change itself. This paper proposes that resistance to change is a function of the background conversations that are ongoingly being spoken and which create the context for both the change initiative and the responses to it. In this context, resistance is not a personal phenomenon, but a social systemic one in which resistance is maintained by the background conversations of the organization. Successfully dealing with this source of resistance requires distinguishing the background conversations and completing the past.

Resistance to Constructed Futures

Why is there resistance to change in organizations? Some theorists propose that resistance occurs because it threatens the status quo (Beer, 1980; Hannan & Freeman, 1988; Hermon-Taylor, 1985; Spector, 1989), increasing fear and the anxiety of real or imagined consequences (Morris & Raben, 1995; Smith & Berg, 1987) including threats to personal security (Bryant, 1989) and confidence in an ability to perform (Morris & Raben, 1995; O'Toole, 1995). Change may also be resisted because it threatens the way people make sense of the world, calling into question their values and rationality (Ledford, et al., 1989), and prompting some form of self justification (Staw, 1981) or defensive reasoning (Argyris, 1990). Or, resistance may occur when people distrust or have past resentments toward those leading change (Block, 1993; Bridges, 1980; Bryant, 1989; Ends & Page, 1977; O'Toole, 1995), when they have different understandings or assessments of the situation (Morris & Raben, 1995), or are protecting established social relations that are perceived to be threatened (Lawrence, 1954).

When taken as a whole, much of the literature on resistance to change takes a modernist perspective in which it is assumed that everyone shares the same objective and homogeneous reality everywhere. In other words, all participants to a change initiative encounter not only the same initiative, but they do so within the exact same context. Given this assumption, differences in participant responses (e.g., resistance) must reflect either misunderstandings about the change, or individual characteristics and attributes that are "in the way" of the change. Accordingly, resistance is objectified as a socio-psychological phenomenon that exists "over there" "in the individual"¹ (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Successfully dealing with resistance, therefore, ultimately depends on an ability to accurately represent and describe the source of resistance "in the individual" and to choose and implement strategies appropriate for addressing and overcoming that source.

But what if we take a postmodernist, constructivist perspective in which there is no homogeneous reality that is everywhere the same for everyone? What if resistance is not a "thing" or a characteristic of an objective reality found "over there" "in the individual", but is a function of the constructed reality in which people live? In constructivist and postmodern perspectives, the reality we know is interpreted, constructed, or enacted through social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Watzlawick, 1984; Weick, 1979). Within this view, it is not possible for

¹ The phrase "in the individual" should be construed broadly to include groups, teams, etc. Thus, resistance can be seen as "in the group" as when resistance is seen as a function of group norms or cohesion.

participants to know any “true” reality independent of themselves meaning that “different people in different positions at different moments live in different realities” (Shotter, 1993, p. 17).

Resistance, therefore, is not to be found “in the individual”, but in the constructed reality in which the individual operates. And, since different constructed realities differ not only in their outcomes, but also in the kind of talk with which they are conducted and maintained, participants in different constructed realities will have a different sense of themselves and their worlds. As a result, they will engage in different actions, and give different forms of resistance, which depend on the reality in which they live.

We propose that resistance is a function of the socially constructed reality in which people live, and that depending on the nature of that constructed reality, the form of resistance to change will vary. Since constructed realities provide the context in which people act and interact, the nature of these realities establishes the opportunities for action, how people will see the world, what actions to take, etc. Accordingly, change, and resistance to it, would be functions of the constructed reality; it is the nature of this reality that gives resistance its particular form, mood, and flavor.

This paper seeks to relocate resistance as a response to a change initiative that is a product of the background conversations that constitute the constructed reality in which participants live, rather than existing as some “true” reality found in an individual or their external conditions. As such, resistance would be a systemic and public phenomenon that is found in the conversations (interactions) in which people engage (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Specifically, we propose that resistance is a socially constructed reality, constructed in, through, and by three different types of conversations that source and engender resistance to change, and that each one generates distinctly different experiences and relations to change.

These three types of conversations are conversations for complacency, resignation, and cynicism. What we propose is speculative, not definitive, and is intended to provoke ideas and thinking about resistance to change as a product of the constructed realities in which participants live. It is not our intent to provide a comprehensive review of all the constructed realities that might engender resistance to change. Rather, it is an attempt to articulate three possible realities based on their historic appearance in the literature of change.

1. CONVERSATIONS: CONSTRUCTED REALITY'S PROCESSES AND PRODUCTS

The realities we know as "organizations", "change", and "resistance" come to exist in the process of conversations and discourses that constitute those realities. At the most basic level, conversations are "what is said and listened to" between people (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). A broader view of conversations as "a complex, information-rich mix of auditory, visual, olfactory and tactile events" (Cappella & Street, 1985), includes not only what is spoken, but the full conversational apparatus of symbols, artifacts, theatrics, etc. that are used in conjunction with or as substitutes for what is spoken (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The speaking and listening that goes on between and among people and their many forms of expression in talking, singing, dancing, etc. may all be understood as "conversation".

Conversations can range from a single speech act, e.g., "Do it", to an extensive network of speech acts which constitute arguments (Reike & Sillars, 1984), narratives (Fisher, 1987), and other forms of discourse (e.g., Boje, 1991; Thachankary, 1992). Conversations may be monologues or dialogues and may occur in the few seconds it takes to complete an utterance, or may unfold over centuries, e.g., religion. A single conversation may also include different people over time, as is the case with the socialization of new entry people in an organization (Wanous, 1992).

Although conversations exist as explicit utterances, much of the way they support the apparent continuity of a reality is by virtue of the intertextual links on which current explicit conversations build and rely. Through their intertextuality (Spivey, 1997), conversations bring both history and background into the present utterance by responding to, reaccentuating, and reworking past conversations while anticipating and shaping subsequent ones. So our conversations are populated and constituted in varying degrees by what others have said before us, and by our own sayings and ways of saying (Bakhtin, 1986). This accumulated mass of continuity and consistency maintains and objectifies reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Watzlawick, 1990). When conversations become objectified, we grant them the same permanence as objects, assuming that the conversations themselves exist as "things" independent of our speaking. But this is not the case: conversations are ephemeral and have no existence or permanence other than when they are being spoken (Berquist, 1993).

Thus conversations are not only the process through which we construct reality, but they are also the product of that construction process: conversations become the reality (Berquist, 1993). What we construct in this linguistic process are

linguistic products, i.e., conversations that are interconnected with other linguistic products to form an intertextuality or network of conversations. Our realities exist in the words, phrases, and sentences that have been combined to create descriptions, reports, explanations, understandings etc., that in turn create what is described, reported, explained, understood, etc. Indeed, it is these creations that constitute organizations as networks of conversations, and it is shifting these conversations that constitutes organizational change (Ford, 1999a).

In this context, resistance is a reality constructed in, by, and through conversations. This locates resistance in conversational patterns (e.g., orders of discourse) rather than "in the individual". Further, resistance is a function of the extent of agreement (conversational support) that exists for it. In constructed realities, the more conversations that support, are attached to, or in some other way are associated with a particular conversation, the more "pull" there is to keeping that conversation in place and the more apparent support there is for that conversation. These patterns and agreement encourage psychotherapists to intervene in the network of conversations that constitute a family, since working with the individual alone is insufficient (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974).

2. BACKGROUND CONVERSATIONS AND RESISTANCE

A background conversation is an implicit, unspoken "back drop" or "background" against which explicit, foreground conversations occur; it is both a context and a reality. Background conversations are a result of our experience within a tradition that is both direct and inherited, and provide a space of possibilities that will direct the way we listen to what is said and what is unsaid (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Harré, 1980; Heidegger, 1971; Winograd & Flores, 1987). These backgrounds are manifest in our everyday dealings as a familiarity or obviousness that pervades our situation and is presupposed by every conversation. Yet, in spite of this pervasiveness, we are unaware of these background conversations and they remain unnoticed until there is a "breakdown" in which a background presumption is violated (Winograd & Flores, 1987).

To participate in a reality is to be given by its background conversations, and to borrow from the idioms and appropriate forms of talk that are already in place, already there in the background (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). Different realities have different frameworks and vocabularies, different rules and moves in which people speak and act and that constitute a particular form of life (Wittgenstein, 1958). In this context, a form of life is a consensual domain that "exists among a community of individuals and is continually regenerated through their linguistic

activity and the structural coupling generated by that activity" (Winograd & Flores, 1987).

The notion of rules and consensual domain presupposes a community within which common agreement and convention fixes the meaning of what is said and determines whether a particular speaking is correct or incorrect (Wittgenstein, 1958). For example, to argue "rationally" is to play by the rules in some contexts, but not in others (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). These agreements, however, are not agreements that have been explicitly agreed to, but are "quiet agreements" that reside in the background conversations and are evident only in the practices and patterns of action and reaction (e.g., giving and taking orders) that constitute the given reality. And, since each reality is different, what constitutes correctness and incorrectness can only be established relative to the particular reality.

What is significant for our purposes is that each reality produces a particular view of life within which what is said derives meaning from the background conversations or context in which it is said, not from a one-to-one relationship with the objects and actions they denote in the observable world. There is no preexisting system of meaning, no inherent essences that we uncover, only the meaning that is created through our ongoing interactions and understandings within the historical development of specific realities (Roty, 1989). These meanings and understandings are contained within the vocabularies and communication protocols that comprise different realities. The meaning of a word, therefore, is in its use within a particular reality and only within that reality can that meaning take place. Isolated from a context of use, words are meaningless, and within different contexts, there are different meanings.

The idea that meaning is a function of the particular reality in which one is engaged implies that there is not one empirical, definitive world to be discovered, only the plurality of different realities. Truth and falsehood, therefore, do not reside in the agreement among realities, but by whether the world revealed by a particular reality passes or fails the tests of truth associated with that reality. To say that magic is false because it does not conform to the canons of science is to confuse the reality of magic with the reality of science.

We act correlate to the conversations that give us the world, not to an external world of objects, nor to an internal world of feelings, thoughts or meanings. Differences in background conversations lead to different points of view and different realities. People with different background conversations draw different conclusions from the same physical evidence (Schrage, 1989). Economists, for example, see the

world they do not because the world is that way, but because the language of their discourse, their background conversations, gives them that world.

Different background conversations constitute different contexts and give different realities. It is these background conversations that frame any change initiative and “give” people their vocabularies for action and reaction. Accordingly, resistance to change can be seen as a function of different background conversations, which conversations constitute different realities for their participants. And, there is a particular coherence given by the background conversations such that within that reality, everything is appropriate. This means that it is very difficult to challenge one reality from the point of view of another.

Yet, within the studies of change and resistance, this is ongoingly done. One of the questions raised in recent examinations of resistance to change is whether resistance is to the change itself or to something else, such as the consequences of the change (e.g., Dent & Goldberg, 1999). These questions presume that the phenomenon “resistance” exists independent of the conversations about it, and further, that it is a response to still other independently existing conditions or circumstances. In the constructivist view, neither of these assumptions is valid.

3. THREE GENERIC RESISTANCE-GIVING BACKGROUNDS

For any particular conversation, such as a conversation to propose or initiate an organizational change, there may be several different background conversations (realities) that encourage, color, or characterize it. Furthermore, since any change proposal will have been designed, developed, and delivered within the context or framework given by these background realities, they are likely to contain the seeds of conversations for resistance to the initiative.

We propose three generic types of socially constructed background conversations that constitute distinct realities and distinct types of resistance to change. The background realities are complacency, resignation, and cynicism. These particular backgrounds are selected because of the extent to which they have been mentioned in the literature of organization change over time (e.g., Hedberg, Nystrom & Starbuck 1976; Johnson, 1988; Reichers, Wanous & Austin, 1997). Each type of background provides a different perspective on and relationship to a proposed change or a change initiative.

What is important here is that the backgrounds are realities constructed in conversations, rather than existing as objective realities. The three types of backgrounds are constructed by the accumulated responses to success and failure over the history of the organization. These collections will include the attributions of

causes for those successes and failures, and conversations about the futures that are possible in the face of these (constructed) realities.

The following description of each (constructed) background is intended to illuminate the nature of the construction rather than to provide a definitive exemplar of the collected responses to change initiatives. The actual background reality in any organization is likely to manifest the described characteristics in varying forms and degrees.

The Complacent Background

A Complacent Background is constructed on the basis of historical success: the organization that has been successful, whether by innovation or by persistence, has established a background conversation that is a variant of "We will succeed". People are likely to refer to past success(es), and say that current success(es) will continue or that they can be easily repeated (Hedberg et al., 1976; Johnson, 1988). Conversations in a Complacent Background will attribute success to personal or group attributes, capabilities, and actions (Bettman & Weitz, 1983; Kelley, 1973).

In this reality, since historical success is seen as evidence for the efficacy of what has been and is being done (Hedberg, et al., 1976), people are likely to avoid making changes (Gutman, 1988). A proposal for a substantive change in goals or operations introduced in a Complacent Background is likely to engender conversations that reinforce Complacent Resistance, e.g., that new goals are unnecessary in the face of presumed continuation of prior successes (Nichols, 1993). Thus the Complacency Background gives us a "success breeds failure" syndrome (Whetten, 1980) where people will continue to practice once-successful strategies and actions assuming that past successes are the only kinds of success that are needed, and that past actions are all that are required to continue producing it.

Complacent Resistance conversations will reflect a theme of "nothing new or different is needed". There will be talk about relative comfort and satisfaction with the way things are, the way things are done, and their preferred continuation to ensure success in the future. People are likely to express satisfaction and contentment with the way things are (Gutman, 1988; Johnson, 1988), and cliches such as "If its not broken, don't fix it", "Why mess with success?", and "Don't rock the boat." (Ends & Page, 1977; Evans, 1988) may actually be spoken.

In a reality where things are fine, or at least acceptable, change will be talked about as unnecessary (Reger, Mullane, Gustafson, & DeMarie, 1994), and only a powerful stimulus will have people to see a need for any change (Ends & Page, 1977; Spector, 1989). Complacent Resistance conversations are one of the most difficult

to displace or shift (Hedberg, et al., 1976; Johnson, 1988; Nichols, 1993) because of their positive orientation toward the future and their presumption of continued success. Any attempt to inspire or produce a change will be regarded as unnecessary at best and threatening future successes at worst. Complacent Resistance is an appropriate response to a proposal to change a well-working and successful reality that has a promising future as evidenced by the past.

The Resigned Background

Resigned Backgrounds are constructed from historical failure, rather than from success. In the organization where things have gone wrong, whether by internal problems or external conditions, the conversations that constitute a Resigned Background have accumulated to establish a theme of "This probably won't work either". Things are not the way people want them to be, or believe they could or should be, but conversations in this reality reflect that people have no hope of being able to change them (Reger, et al., 1994). They are likely to speak of themselves or their group or organization as ineffective, and they resign themselves to this reality.

Normally when people encounter failure, they make self-serving attributions for the cause of the failure, blaming it on factors outside of themselves (Bettman & Weitz, 1983; Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1982; Kelley, 1973; Salancik & Meindl, 1984). In the construction of a Resignation Background, however, conversations for self-blame take hold, and individuals blame themselves or their organization for an inability to succeed. In this reality, an individual might say: "My position doesn't give me any power", "I don't have the skills, background, or luck", and "I can't get my colleagues to understand". Members of a group could sustain conversations such as, "We never get the support we need", "Our group never gets included in the big decisions", and "Our company is just not competitive enough". The Resigned Background can be heard in more general statements like "Why should we do this, since it won't make any difference anyway", "What's the point?", and "We'll never.....". Conversations characteristic of a Resigned Background are shared by people who have given up trying, knowing that they will fail (Kouzes & Posner, 1993), and who know themselves as unable to make things better even though they wish they could (Martin, 1991).

A Resigned Background develops as a response to failure and unfulfilled expectations over time. When people expect something to happen and it does not, they are likely to express disappointment and frustration. Repeated expressions of disappointment and frustration collect and give weight to the idea that we are

failures: our success is really hopeless, our desires will never be satisfied, and our commitments will never be fulfilled. We expect to fail even as we wish for success. Conversations in a Resigned Background may demonstrate a sense of despair, apathy, hopelessness, depression, sadness, and listlessness (Steer, 1993).

Introducing a proposal for change into a Resigned Background will engender Resigned Resistance conversations, characterized by half-hearted actions having no life or power in them, and reflecting a lack of motivation and an apparent unwillingness to participate. People may even appear to be deaf to proposals for change, apparently unable to hear or respond, as they attempt to avoid dealing with those areas in which they believe themselves to be powerless. People who ignore the areas in which their resignation is operative may also effectively deny their own resignation (Martin, 1991). Even the option of trying to overcome the resignation cannot be heard as an opportunity for action.

Resigned Resistance conversations, in addition to expressing discouragement or even hopelessness, contain the suggestion that *another* individual or organization could likely succeed, even in these very same circumstances. The problem is not with some external reality; the problem is with the fixed reality of ourselves. Resigned Resistance conversations justify and reinforce not attempting change or improvement, since there is no effective action possible for us, and we can only wait for someone else to step forward to handle the problem (Block, 1993). A change proposal may not be heard as a genuine possibility in a reality of resignation. People who blindly enmeshed in Resigned Resistance conversations have come to accept the inevitability of a hopeless background and the futility in being able to change it (Steer, 1993).

The Cynical Background

The Cynical Background is constructed, like the Resigned Background, from historical failure. But conversations about the *cause* of the failure give us the difference: in the Resigned Background conversations, the cause of failure is assigned to oneself or one's group or organization, but in the Cynical Background, the cause of failure is assigned to a real or fixed external reality, and to other people and groups. Statements like "Who are they kidding, no one can make this work", "I don't know why they bother, this won't work either", and "This is just more of the same old stuff" illustrate a Cynical Background. These conversations reinforce a reality in which *no one* can change things, i.e., it's not just us, it's the way things really are. When a change initiative fails, its failure serves as a validation of the

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Cynical Background (Vance, Brooks, & Tesluk, 1995; Reichers et al., 1997), thus expanding or strengthening the construction.

The Cynical Background is a pessimistic context in which expectations are frustrated and disappointed (Reichers et al., 1997). Failure and inauthenticity are expected, due to shortcomings in others, in the organization or larger systems, or in the world, and nothing can be done to right the wrongs. Nothing can change until "it" changes, one cannot trust the human and systemic elements of "it" to do what they should do, and the future will continue to be dissatisfying, frustrating, and unfulfilling. The Cynical Background gives a reality in which failure will happen because the world IS a particular way, despite any attempts to change it. Further, anyone who thinks otherwise is unwilling to recognize the truth about the way things are, and is inauthentic about recognizing their own inability to be effective in the face of that reality (Vance, et al., 1995; Reichers et al., 1997).

Conversations in a Cynical Background are likely to include references to being let down, deceived, betrayed, or misled by powerful others (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Kouzes & Posner, 1993). These conversations insist, with varying degrees of subtlety, that others knew or should have known the truth about the fixed external reality: they should have known what would happen, or they didn't tell the truth about what they knew. This ignorance or deceit on the part of others is held responsible for setting up or contributing to the failure (Block, 1993; Goldfarb, 1991; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Kouzes & Posner, 1993; Reichers et al., 1997).

Where both the Complacent Background ("I'm already doing the right things") and the Resigned Background ("I can't make any difference"), involve self-directed explanations for resisting a change initiative, the Cynical Background includes attacks on others, portraying those responsible for the change as incompetent, lazy, or both (Reichers, et al., 1997). People in a cynical reality "know" that no one and nothing can make a difference, and may even claim that proponents of the change are dishonest, selfish, and untrustworthy, with questionable and inauthentic motives (Goldner, Ritti, & Ference, 1977; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Reichers et al., 1997).

A proposal for change, introduced in a Cynical Background, will be received by people who are confident that not only will the initiative fail, but that no attempt by *anyone* can ever succeed owing to real and immutable external circumstances or operating principles (Vance, et al., 1995). The conversations that constitute Cynical Resistance will include more overtly hostile and aggressive attacks on the proposed change than those of Resigned Resistance because they include attacks on the credibility and integrity of the people who are proposing or affiliated with the change

initiative (Stivers, 1994). Cynical Resistance conversations reflect a distrust and disbelief in others (Block, 1993; Goldfarb, 1991; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989) and are likely to include anger, resentment, scorn, derision, and contempt (Greenfield, 1994; Kopvillem, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 1993; Stivers, 1994). In a cynical reality, anyone who argues for or supports a change initiative must be engaged in some form of deception or ignorance and should not be trusted. It is appropriate, then, in a cynical reality, that "one must show contempt for the stupidity and absurdity" of others (Stivers, 1994, p. 90) who either fail to recognize or be honest about the way things really are.

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper proposes that peoples' responses to a change initiative are given by the background conversations that have been constructed from historical relationships to success and failure, including the attributions for the causes of success and failure. Different backgrounds give different resistive conversations, actions, and behaviors. A background of complacent conversations constructs a complacent reality, in which a change initiative will be responded to with Complacent Resistance: denial of the need for change, accompanied by procrastination, avoidance, and withdrawal. A background of resigned conversations creates a resigned reality, where a change initiative is greeted with Resigned Resistance: lack of attention to the proposal for change, along with reduced morale, non-participation, and other forms of covert withholding. A background of cynical conversations creates a cynical reality, in which a proposal for change will engender Cynical Resignation: some overt rejection of the change proposal with a likelihood of less visible sabotage, hidden agendas, and politicking.

If the backgrounds that engender resistance are generated and sustained through conversations and their concomitant social information processing (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Ford & Ford, 1995), then the task of changing these backgrounds entails changing what is said. This means that people could come to recognize that they are constructing their reality in their everyday conversations, realize that they do not need to continue saying what they have said in the past, and start saying something different (Rorty, 1989). The power of saying something new is demonstrated in the case of a CEO who broke through the complacency in his organization by generating and sustaining conversations about competing with phantom competitors (Johnson, 1988). Other arguments show that shifting the focus of conversations can produce breakthroughs in organizational performance and change (Oakley & Krug, 1991; Scherr, 1989). These studies suggest that it matters

more that new things are given utterance than whether they are true, real, or accurate.

From the perspective of constructed realities, it makes a difference what people say and to whom they say it. Much of what people know about their world comes from conversations passed on by others, rather than from direct experience. Conversations that include complaining, gossip, undermining and other forms of reactive speaking (Oakley & Krug, 1991) will contribute to the construction of complacent, resigned, and cynical backgrounds. People who engage in such conversations are strengthening these realities in their organization, “infecting” and re-infecting themselves and others with those conversations, and displaying the symptoms (e.g., vocabularies, behaviors, ways of talking, etc) of those backgrounds (Ford, 1999b). These conversations are not simply reports on reality: they are the process of socially constructing, or generating, the reality of the organization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Berquist, 1993; Ford & Ford, 1995; Rorty, 1989; Winograd & Flores, 1987) . Conversations in organizations come to form realities – or cultures – of complacency, resignation, and cynicism.

Present Resistance to Past Change

The three constructed backgrounds presented here portray resistance as a response to an assemblage of conversations about the nature, meanings, and causes of past successes or failures, rather than as a response to the actual conditions and circumstances of the change initiative itself. Each background provides a coherent and complete sense-making structure that integrates the past and the background construction seamlessly: the individual is engaged in conversations that are given by the past. This means that resistance to change is never about what is happening now, but is always about what has happened before, and the meanings that the past has assigned to possibilities for the future.

Traditional approaches for dealing with resistance treat it as a response to the current change situation, i.e., to what is happening now, with this change. This view implies that if managers can handle the current change situation properly, including the personal feelings and the assessments of their staff, then resistance will be minimized and ultimately overcome. Accordingly, managers use resistance reduction strategies to address those issues that appear to arise in response to the current change (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Morris & Raben, 1995), or they bypass (ignore) resistance all together (Hermon-Taylor, 1985) .

The proposal that constructed backgrounds engender resistive behaviors independent of the situational factors of a change initiative suggests that unless and

until these backgrounds are themselves addressed and changed, resistance will continue. In fact, all traditional attempts at reducing resistance will be seen through the perceptual filters of the different backgrounds. For example, involvement, education, and participation are among the strategies recommended for dealing with resistance (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Morris & Raben, 1995). But in a complacent reality, such strategies are likely to be seen as unnecessary; in a resigned reality they will be seen as futile; in a cynical reality, they may be seen as malicious. Similarly, attempts to increase the credibility of management (Kouzes & Posner, 1993) will be received with resistance tempered by complacency, resignation, or cynicism. Traditional situation oriented attempts to overcome a resistance that is a product of constructed background conversations will only serve to further reinforce that background and expand or strengthen the resistance.

Personal Resistance and Background Resistance

Where resistance to new change is a function of the background conversations that have accumulated from past responses to prior changes, the different qualities of each type of background will provide its own unique kind of resistance conversations. These conversations will be public and observable, unlike the internal states of individuals that must be posited to explain resistance as a more personal phenomenon. It may well be that the subjective experiences and assessments which have been posited as sources of resistance are simply the ways we interpret conversational expressions given by the three constructed backgrounds for change.

When employees say "The risk of change threatens everything good that we have built", we can either posit personal fear as the cause of resistance, or we can look to the background of complacency conversations in which their utterance makes sense. When someone says, "The change is a good idea, and I wish it could work, but we don't have the know-how or the resources to do it successfully," we can explain the resistance in terms of the individual's timidity or need for information and training, or we can consider the background conversations for resignation in which the individual operates. Another statement, "I know what they are telling us, but I don't believe they are giving us the whole picture," could be considered to reveal a personal lack of trust, or it could simply be an expression from a background of cynical conversations in the workplace. These two equally valid approaches for understanding resistance to change, the personal and the conversational, suggest the need for research that examines, among other things, which comes first: the

constructed background conversations for change, or the reported personal experiences and assessments of the individuals.

From the constructionist perspective, the reason that traditional resistance reduction strategies are unlikely to work is because they tend to rely on some form of increased understanding or involvement from those individuals who appear to be resisting (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). This can be expected to produce a shift in an individual's assessment of something (e.g., from agree to strongly agree) or metric for making the assessment, but the background conversations remain unaddressed. It is possible that we are focusing such resistance reducing strategies on those individuals who are simply the most vocal expressors of the background, and failing to address the roots of resistance. The difficulty with applying strategies for improving understanding or increasing involvement for people who are operating in complacent, resigned, or cynical realities is that neither understanding nor involvement is the issue. What is at issue is a shift in the background conversations.

It is our assertion that complacency, resignation, and cynicism are realities to which people are blind. People do not see their world as a product of their conversations, but, conversely, they see their conversations as a factual report on an existing world. Changing the background involves making people aware that they are operating in a socially constructed context and that they are not limited to that context (Marzano, Zaffron, Zraik, Robbins & Yoon, 1995), but can create another one just as they did the first.

Changing the Background

Background conversations remain in the background until they are revealed to us as constructions. Indeed, the power in dialogue is the ability to bring background constructions (assumptions, conclusions, decisions, etc) into the foreground so that they can be examined. Until this is done, the conversations remain transparent and unrecognized, existing below our level of consciousness where they are neither examined nor understood (Levy & Merry, 1986; Lincoln, 1985). As a result, we act and react consistent with the background conversations that give our reality and the hidden strategies used for dealing with life, and determine the way we operate and the choices we make (Goss, Pascale & Athos, 1993). Altering these background conversations will shift the context in which the very content of our thinking and feeling occur and our beliefs and perceptions are organized (Marzano, et al., 1995). When the background conversation shifts, the foundation on which we construct our understanding of the world shifts too, and we can feel, think, and behave in new ways.

We propose that one way to deal with complacent, resigned, and cynical backgrounds is through reinvention (Goss, et al., 1993) . Reinvention differs from change in that it is not about changing what is, but undoing what is and creating something new. Reinvention involves reframing (Dunbar, et al., 1996; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Levy & Merry, 1986), and inquiring into the context in which we are interpreting and interacting with the world, with the intent of uncovering that context. Once the context is revealed, and people can take responsibility for having propagated it, a new context can be designed. Creating this new context constitutes a second order (Levy & Merry, 1986) , Gamma (Thompson & Hunt, 1996) , or ontological change (Marzano, et al., 1995) . When a new context is generated, the foundation on which people construct their understanding or “framing” of the world is altered, as are their actions (Goss, et al., 1993) .

Conversations for closure (Ford & Ford, 1995) enable and facilitate reinvention. Bridges (1980) proposes that where prior changes have not been closed or completed, people are left dissatisfied. All subsequent attempts to introduce change will occur within this “conversational space” of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. Given that the backgrounds are proposed as the origin of resistance conversations, and these backgrounds are constituted by past responses to success and failure, it can be said that the incomplete past has defined the future. People are bound to the existing background until the conversations of the past have been brought to a close (Albert, 1983; Albert, 1984).

We suggest that incompleteness and a lack of closure from the past underlies each of the three backgrounds discussed here. This incompleteness is a key source of apparent resistance to change. Failed or fulfilled expectations from the past have been interpreted in particular ways and given certain meanings, which have then congealed into one of three backgrounds. These backgrounds then engender certain behaviors and communications as a response to any new proposals for change. Resistance, whether complacent, resigned, or cynical, is a reaction to the incomplete past; in fact, it is the past made present.

One of the implications of this perspective is that people can be supported in completing the incomplete past, with all its attendant expectations and interpretations of success and failure. Conversations for closure are constituted by a dialogue in which people examine the assumptions and expectations that underlie their actions and afford people the opportunity to reflect on their responsibility for what has happened (Block, 1993; Isaacs, 1993; Senge, 1990) and the ways in which it has been interpreted. In this dialogue, people explicitly state what is incomplete

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about the past and explore ways to resolve the differences and misunderstandings arising in the conversation. These conversations also give people a new opportunity to be acknowledged for what they have done and not done, and to recognize the expectations that have and have not been fulfilled in the organization's past, and to discover and express their commitments for the future. This acknowledgment and discovery brings new recognition and perspective to the contributions, actions, and outcomes of past changes (Ford & Ford, 1995), and opens an opportunity for celebration. Celebration is more than rewards: it connotes ceremony, acclaim, and festivity that honors individuals, groups, events, and achievements (DeForest, 1986; Morris & Raben, 1995) .

Conversations for closure are essential for creating "a sense of harmonious completion" wherein tension with past events is reduced or removed and balance and equilibrium are restored (Albert, 1983; Bridges, 1980) . As Jick (1993, p. 197) states "disengaging from the past is critical to awakening to a new reality". Closure allows the past to remain in the past, which makes possible a new recognition of what is actually present, and thus a new opportunity to create a background independent of yesterday's points of view (Goss, et al., 1993) . After closure is complete, people can then be supported in inventing new backgrounds based on a created relationship to the future, rather than the past-based conversations of complacency, resignation, or cynicism.

Closure conversations are pivotal in completing the past and creating a new response to an uncertain future because they allow people to reassess their responsibility in generating and sustaining different background conversations, and thereby to choose a different response (Block, 1993). People do not naturally see that it is their own expectations, their own responses to success and failure, and their own conversations about these things that are the source of the three backgrounds in which they speak and listen and behave. The process of reclaiming responsibility brings a new opportunity to create different responses to proposals for change. Conversations for closure allow people to complete their past with respect to issues and events involving change, and to move on (Albert, 1983; Bridges, 1980) to either get in touch with their own genuine commitments from the past or to generate new commitments altogether.

The completion dialogue needs to include an explicit acknowledgment that new possibilities and new backgrounds now exist, however tenuously, as a result of the conversation (Ford & Ford, 1995). The new background will be built in the same way as the old one: by an accretion of conversations about success and failure, past

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and future, people and circumstances. What is said from this point forward matters more than ever, because it is now done more deliberately, with a new recognition of building a reality. The new background contains possibilities, opportunities, and problems that are different from those that existed before the conversation for closure. Similarly, it contains pitfalls: the greatest being a return to old speech habits, vocabularies, explanations, and behaviors. Completing a conversation for closure may itself be an occasion to celebrate. As with other things to celebrate, e.g., the stages of change, successes, losses and failures, people, and events (DeForest, 1986), there is an opportunity to clear the records of the past to make way for new backgrounds to gain a foothold.

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