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The Profession of IT Resistance Is Your Friend

*Resistance to innovation proposals is a gift.
Harness it and your innovation will move faster.*

AS CANDLES ATTRACT moths, so innovation offers attract resisters. You know this from experience. You work hard to propose something of demonstrable benefit to your clients or community and their first inclination is to resist it. Logical arguments do not change their minds. Optimists unhelpfully tell you to keep your chin up because resistance signifies you are doing something important. You start to wonder if anyone takes you seriously. Resistance is so common and intractable that it has a name: Valley of Death. Everyone wishes you good luck in getting through it alive. What is the story about resistance?

The most strenuous resistance arrives as you implement the innovation rather than when you merely propose it. Implementation asks people to commit to the new practice whereas proposals only ask them to consider it. Resistance to adoption is a social issue, not a management or production failure. Overcoming resistance is a social skill.

Your community is an ecosystem of living creatures. The interactions

among them are stable for long periods of time. Paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould postulated a theory of punctuated equilibrium for ecosystems. He showed that fossil records demonstrate long periods of stability interspersed with occasional periods of sudden, transformative change.

As with other ecosystems, human communities share the behavior of punctuated equilibrium. The punctuations can be triggered by external events that change the system, by new technologies that alter the costs of performing tasks, or by internal conversations that generate new concerns. The equilibria are not rigid; they can change in small steps, called *incremental innovations*, which mildly disturb the overall equilibrium. Occasionally major changes, called *disruptive innovations*, hit part of the system, forcing adjustments throughout the whole system. And sometimes a big change, which we call an *avalanche*, transforms the whole system and generates the need for an entirely new equilibrium.

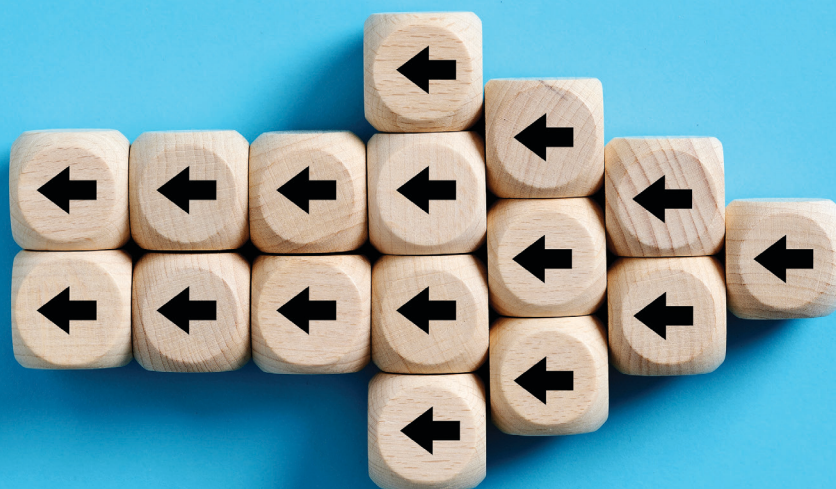
All changes—incremental, disruptive, and avalanche—disturb the equi-

librium of an ecosystem. The system “fights back” by resisting the change. Resistance to change is a normal systemic response. Let’s explore the navigational skills that will support you in coping with it.

The Nature of Resistance

The abstract idea of equilibrium does not help leaders learn how to navigate through the resistance. The key to navigation is to frame resistance as the negative reaction of people to the proposed or imposed change. They perceive the change as a threat that destabilizes their comfort, identity, or power. Their resistance may be passive, such as by indifference, or active, such as by aggressive use of power to derail your initiative. Your leadership task is to explore the value in the new practices and help your community see how the proposed change might address their concerns.

Equilibria are held in place by implicit agreements in the social community. The current practices satisfy their current concerns. Only if their concerns change or are put at risk will they be open to new practices and a new equilib-



rium. An innovation leader proposing a change of practice needs to understand and address those concerns. Rather than run *away* from the resistance or trying to overcome it by force, leaders move *toward* the resistance with curiosity and humility to understand why people are committed to the current equilibrium. The goal is discover latent concerns, which when brought to their awareness will motivate people to move toward the proposed change. You will not find a cause for the resistance by looking at external circumstances. You will find its causes in the everyday conversations of people in the community.

Even though resistance most forcefully appears when you ask people to commit to a change, there are many early signs. They appear at the beginning when no one resonates with the need for change you declared, or when your envisioning story inspires mostly yawns, or when your initial offer to do it attracts few takers.

Adopting Practice

In his classic book *Diffusion of Innovations*,⁴ Everett Rogers wrote that on aver-

age approximately 16% of the community would be early adopters, 68% majority adopters, and the remaining 16% laggards who may never adopt. Each group has concerns distinct from the others. Early adopters are disposed to try new things; they tolerate risk, they put up with bugs in the early releases, they want to stay on the leading edge, and they do not want to be seen as laggards. Majority adopters want stability; they want leadership backing, predictable costs, reliable infrastructure, low risks, multiple vendors, good technical support, and helpful customer service. They seek endorsement from early adopters. If early adopters resist you, there is little chance the majority will follow. And if only early adopters embrace you, all you get 16% of the potential market.

In his book *Crossing the Chasm*,² Geoffrey Moore wrote that many start-up businesses fail because their founders appealed to early adopters only and did not set aside resources to appeal later to the majority. After two or three years, they saturated the market of early adopters but had no money left to develop their offer for the majority. It is

very important that leaders prepare offers for both early adopters and majority adopters.

Subcommunities

Unless your community is very small, it probably contains several subcommunities, each with its own set of early and majority adopters. You can see this easily in any sport. Consider baseball, which is a large community comprising individual teams, commissioners, game schedulers, ticket sellers, paraphernalia marketers, museum and hall of fame staff, and farm teams. Suppose you propose an innovation for baseball: a time limit for pitchers to make their next throws. You will need to negotiate with most of the subcommunities to be sure the implementation of this new rule will be accepted. In effect, you are customizing the main offer to reflect each subcommunity's concerns. Forming a package of customized versions of the main offer is often a good strategy for overcoming resistance. However, this strategy will fail if some of the subcommunities demand conditions the others cannot accept.



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Another strategy is to reframe the main offer to appeal to all the communities. Steve Jobs, former CEO of Apple Computer, was an inveterate reframer. The Apple Apps Store (2008), which became the model for distributing software to devices, was a reframing of iTunes (2003). Jobs created iTunes to reframe the controversy created by Napster, which was distributing bootlegged soundtracks over the Internet; iTunes distributed copyright-protected soundtracks at an affordable price. The iPod, invented in 2001, was itself a reframing of a portable mp3 music player. His most majestic reframing came with the iPhone (2007). He brought several technologies together: the iPod music player, cellphone service, Internet connectivity, and software apps. He needed to bring several potentially resistant subcommunities together to make this happen. Avid iPod users had to be convinced they would get better music service if their iPod were absorbed into the iPhone. Cellphone service providers had to expand their data services significantly to accommodate new demand from Internet-connected phones. Software developers had to start offering software for a new platform. Content developers had to ensure their copyrights would be honored. Jobs did not position iPhone as a convergence of these technologies. He reframed the whole concept of a phone into a comprehensive communication device customized to its owner's identity and preferences. It was a fashion statement and a tool for intimately connecting and sharing with friends. Jobs's reframing created a context in which carriers, developers, and

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owners could coexist harmoniously.

Some subcommunities may be so deeply in conflict that tailored or reframed offers do not work. This situation is frequently called a wicked problem. The conflicting groups are deadlocked in a power struggle with interlocking histories and wildly different interpretations.⁴ One way to deal with this challenge is to bring representatives of all the groups together in a facilitated meeting to search for common concerns. In the resulting dialogue, participants may modify how they articulate their concerns as they talk and listen—in effect helping each other to reframe the problem to something mutually agreeable.

The Power of External Forces

External forces beyond their control force many communities into change. Examples are sudden emergencies, disruptions by other businesses, and avalanches. Communities often react by resisting the need to change, instead sitting by and hoping for the best.

Natural disasters such as fires, earthquakes, and hurricanes can suddenly make normal practices inoperative. People may have to evacuate their homes, tolerate power and communication outages, and repair damage. Shortages of food and fuel impair fire, police, and medical services. One way to resist is to go into a panic and wait for a savior to appear and make things right. In reality, it is much better to work with neighbors to find ways to deal with the new situation. Public agencies prepare for these contingencies by planning how first responders will react, stockpiling emergency supplies, positioning supplies at key distribution points, practicing interagency coordination, and practicing responses.

A second kind of change-inducing force is what Clayton Christensen, a Harvard business professor, called the "disruptive innovation." He meant an innovation that renders an existing line of business obsolete and unprofitable. In disruptive innovation, an established company's line of business is challenged by a competitor's cheaper, lower-quality version. Eventually the competitor builds a higher-quality product and starts siphoning the established company's customers. This induces a dilemma for the incumbent: Should

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they stick with the successful current model or change to an unfamiliar, more competitive model? Many established companies have been disrupted by this process and subsequently disappeared. Resistance often takes the form of complacency and reluctance to change the business model. It is better for business leaders to constantly monitor for signs, such as customer loss, that competitors are appealing to their customers. The key to avoiding disruption is developing a new practice while the earlier practice is still profitable.

A third kind of change-inducing force is a social avalanche. This is a sweeping transition in the everyday practices and institutions of a community.¹ It transforms the community's ecosystem. Everything changes. Businesses, standard operating practices, and identities are swept away and replaced with new ones. Power is reconfigured. Examples are the personal computer, the Internet, and artificial intelligence. The precursors may be subtle and easily dismissed. Even when they are seen, precursors only signal that the conditions for a tipping point are ripe. Our science cannot predict and our technology cannot control the changes.

Avalanches can be triggered by changes in relative costs within the ecosystem that may at first appear incremental. For example, an automotive avalanche has been forming as the costs of electric vehicles drop below those of internal combustion engines. Tony Seba, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, estimates the crossover will happen by 2030. Futurist and entrepreneur Ray Kurzweil predicts an avalanche by 2045 when the power of information technology equals the power of the brain, an event he called

the Singularity. Andy Grove, CEO of Intel Corporation, developed a 10X (10 times) rule of thumb to advise when avalanches might happen: A new technology with a 10X advantage compared to existing technology attracts large-scale adoption. He prepared by tasking his research labs to find implementations of the new technology so that Intel could react competitively when the time came.

Observers of impending and potentially sweeping changes are not trying to scare people but rather to alert them to the coming changes so they are prepared to adapt and can create new products and services for the world after the change.

Reactivity

At its essence, resistance is a negative assessment of your innovation offer accompanied by social power to thwart you. It can appear in any of these guises:

- ▶ Unwillingness to change institutional structures, rules, and other social agreements.
- ▶ Discomfort and frustration when trying out the new practice.
- ▶ Perceived threats to identity, community standing, comfort, or power.
- ▶ Negative assessments spread in the network (“viral gossip” and “bad buzz”).
- ▶ Apathy and other negative moods, especially resignation and resentment.
- ▶ Organized opposition by powerful players or groups.

Resisters are not “bad guys”—their concerns are often legitimate, and their assessments may be well grounded. You have a greater chance to address their resistance by listening and addressing their concerns, than by pressing or compelling them to accept your solution. You can inadvertently generate greater resistance by not listening to their concerns and instead trying to sell, convince, persuade, cajole, or coerce them into adoption. It often helps to mobilize influential early adopters as voices of support in the network. You must always be listening and sensing concerns.

Although resistance is normal and expected, it is still unnerving. People react to resistance in four ways:

- ▶ **Ignore.** Pretend it does not exist and does not matter to you.
- ▶ **Evade.** Step aside and do not engage with it.
- ▶ **Defend.** Meet the challenge with a

strong defense, using force if necessary. Overwhelm the resisters with pushback, explanations, and declarations.

▶ **Blend.** Flow with the resistance, seeking to understand the concerns behind it and revising offers to take care of those concerns. Mobilize followers to build social power behind your offers and neutralize the social power of the resistance.

In our work with government and industry leaders, we have found that ignoring and evading do not deal effectively with the resistance. Defending often takes the form of a person using their power to declare that their way is “the way” and organizing force to crush the resistance or foment an insurgency. While it may be perceived to be effective, defending against resistance rarely outlives the tenure of the leader: When the powerful advocate departs, the community abandons the new practice and reverts to the old. Blending means to align your momentum with the resister, by listening, acknowledging their concerns, and offering to respond to those concerns. Blending is the most effective way to counter resistance. Blending leads to improvements in the offer and creates more satisfied members of your community.

For many of us, the greatest obstacle is self-resistance. We make negative self-assessments that bring us moods of apathy, complacency, resignation, or resentment. When you encounter resistance, take a close look. Is it coming from others? Or you? □

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