



YSC'S CULTURE CHANGE & LEADERSHIP SERIES: ISSUE 6

# REFRAMING RESISTANCE

Reactions to culture change, even negative ones, are natural, human,  
and always insightful.



**In culture change, 'resistance' is a common concept. Yet the word is problematic. It says that the issue is the people doing the 'resisting', and that if they would only stop, the culture change strategy would work. This is a counterproductive label. Reactions are a natural part of the change process, and negative ones always contain valuable insight for improving the process itself.**

When it comes to culture change, it is all too easy to play the blame game at the first sign of trouble. Individuals are labelled 'resistant', they in turn describe the 'ivory tower' of those leading the change, and the program itself is universally spoken of as 'a challenge'. After a token attempt at listening and concessions, resistance becomes something to overcome – to uncover and carefully manage.

This pattern can be avoided. It takes more than a shift in language alone but thinking about 'reactions' instead of 'resistance' is a starting point in breaking the cycle.

Reactions to culture change are as inevitable as they are understandable. After all, people must sever an emotional tie to the 'old way', work to understand how their skills, personality and values fit into the new way, and then reforge that emotional connection. They are being asked to change how they express themselves and that is deep, personal work. What matters is that organizations support this process with empathy, understanding, and a focus on the human.

## HERE ARE THREE THINGS FOR THOSE SPEARHEADING CHANGE TO BEAR IN MIND WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH.

1

### **Language shapes reality, so choose your words wisely**

The language we use matters. Language influences the way we think and what we focus on. As soon as the word resistance is used, it implies a right or wrong way to respond. Not surprisingly, if you view certain behaviors as 'resistant' it implies that the person's perspective is counterproductive, and they feel judged and dismissed. This in turn is likely to amplify any concerns that individual or group of people have. When it comes to culture change, the use of language influences the perceived ownership of change, what is deemed important and whether people feel heard.

2

### **Challenges are complex; blame is over-simple**

A core challenge with shifting culture lies in a 'short cut' most people make, to either ascribe failures to the organization, or to individuals within the organization. This binary perspective overlooks the fact that culture change is a complex, dynamic interaction between context and individual behaviors. Given this, culture change needs to be led through multiple points of interaction in the business. YSC's framework, which delineates the leadership, social and structural drivers of change, is a pragmatic starting point to ensure the organization is leading change in an aligned, integrated way.

3

### **Culture change is personal, and asks a lot of the individual**

More often than not, culture change requires a change in mindset. We are asking people to change how they express their values – a manifestation of their identity that has made them successful to date. Individual priorities and habits may have to shift. Negative responses to proposed culture change are usually borne out of a sense of loss or threat to one's current operating context. Will my skills still be valued? What are my choice points in this change? What does the change mean for my team, and will I still belong? More so than any other form of change, culture change is not merely a process to roll out. It requires two-way interactions and team discussions that support the deeper levels of change required.

# AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL, HOW CAN LEADERS HELP OTHERS THRIVE THROUGH CULTURE CHANGE?

Culture change only succeeds when individual leaders at all levels feel a sense of cultural ownership and accountability, and when they actively support others. After all, team cultures are the unit in which organizational culture is expressed. Team leaders will often be the first port of call for those experiencing negative reactions to change – and they may even share the concerns themselves.

## HERE ARE FOUR TIPS FOR LEADERS LOOKING TO BUILD CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE REALITIES OF INDIVIDUALS IN THEIR TEAM AND THE BROADER ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE.

1

### Use reactions as a source of creative problem solving

Culture change is complicated, and it is inevitable that there will be gaps in even the most well considered culture strategy. Negative reactions are useful, be they from your team, survey data, or colleagues. They may indicate misalignment within the change program, telling you where to focus to improve the effectiveness of your cultural strategy. Thinking of concerns as 'negative' or 'resistance' overlooks the opportunities for creative problem solving. After all, the goal is more than just compliance: it's about winning hearts and minds. Lean into reactions with curiosity and use the energy to collectively explore possibilities that address the potential blockers.

2

### Avoid categorical labels and fixed perceptions

It's tempting to label people by their reactions to a change: 'he drags his feet', 'she is a positive person', 'they are the old guard'. But change reactions are a tangled integration of thoughts and feelings, and whilst people might have general patterns in the way they respond to change, numerous studies show the primary importance of contextual factors that vary every time. As a leader, you have more influence than you realize over your team members' responses. Categorizing your team members into different buckets brings a 'fixed mindset' to the dynamic. Instead, seek to understand their individual contexts, and see their reactions through the lens of what is being asked of them, and what may help them to shift.

3

### Consider the three basic needs of the individuals in your team

There are three essential human needs at work: competence (learning and mastering new skills), autonomy (feeling in control of goals and choices) and belonging (feeling connected to people). Does the culture change pose a perceived loss around one or more of them for your team? Coach them around their opportunities to grow and develop through the change – whilst reinforcing what will still be valued about their skill sets. Invite their input around manifesting the culture change in your team and part of the business. Help them to see what this means for their role, and their purpose in the organization, reinforcing the relationships and connectedness that bind them to your organization.

4

### Own your own reactions

Too often it is assumed that leaders should automatically be on board with all aspects of culture change programs. Take time to notice your own reaction to the change. What did you quickly align around, and where were you more reticent? What scepticisms or concerns did you have internally that you may be trying to downplay? Where do you feel a sense of potential loss, as you make an intentional move away from a historical culture where you were successful? Once processed, own your reactions to the culture change and help others see that we all have mixed thoughts and feelings, and it is only by processing these that we can create a positive journey forward.

## IN CONCLUSION

Reactions to culture change are inevitable, natural and human. Negative reactions are often valuable windows into how to refine a culture change program to fit with the needs of people. Leaders play a key role in guiding others through the psychological change process, and the first part of that is understanding their own reactions.

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