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Managing Resistance to Change Requires a Bigger Picture

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Managing resistance requires a shift of views. A project's success is influenced by both the CIO's actions and the actions and reactions of everyone in the organization. CIOs must understand the "bigger picture" of organizational structures to leverage key interrelationships that influence behavior.

Overview

Key Challenges

- CIOs trigger resistance unintentionally when they fail to act on the key interrelationships that influence behavior in their organizations.
- CIOs employ unproductive implementation strategies and fail to engage the organization when they lead from their own isolated position and perspective.
- Many CIOs push harder when faced with continuous resistance and pressure to change, ignoring the readiness of the company, hence failing to promote behavioral change that sticks.

Recommendations

CIOs charged with transforming the business, yet facing resistance to change, must:

- **Diagnose systemic relationships to identify potential pockets of resistance** by investigating readiness, permission and willingness to change.
- **Ask powerful questions to understand the resistance within the system** by understanding goals, reality and options.
- **Parcel and sequence their strategy, increasing the feasibility of the overall transformation** by taking into account both the "harder" and "softer" elements of the organization system.
- **Emphasize the holistic value of change** by connecting corporate purpose with social, environmental, team and individual purpose.

Introduction

Why does resistance exist? In nature, objects have a natural tendency to resist change to their state of motion – that is, an object at rest, stays at rest unless acted upon. Friction, or resistance, is the force that holds back change. Business organizations function similarly in that with change comes the instinct to resist. Transformation only occurs when the organizational effort is more potent than resistance.

What makes the transformation of businesses more complicated is that resistance is not isolated but is systemic. Organizations work as interconnected networks composed of both “hard” and “soft” elements:

- **Hard elements** include a business strategy, a business model and an operating model
- **Soft elements** include traditions, values, individuality and behavioral attributes

This systemic perspective means you have to look beyond personalities and events themselves to the key interrelationships which created the situation in the first place. ¹

Most CIOs miss the mark by failing to recognize this complex systemic nature. Some leaders advance technical features, such as processes and systems, and leave out critical behavioral elements. Consequently, the required shift in performance does not materialize. Other leaders center the transformation around implementing behavioral change, but fail to adjust operating models, performance indicators and governance. Impatient and pressured for results, many leaders start pushing and confronting resistance, ignoring the readiness level of the company for change. Without proper support and rewards, new behaviors cannot flourish. This strategy makes the transformation process an arduous one for all those involved. Once their transformation fails, they blame individual behavior and bad luck for their lack of success. However, when the organizational network is unbalanced, the system naturally resists.

The system is responsible for its own behavior.

A fluid transformation occurs when leaders stop looking at transformation efforts isolated from the rest of the system and shift their perspective. Once they see how the project interacts with the system, they learn to place effort in the right elements of the system – not too much, not too little, just enough effort to beat resistance.

Managing resistance will require a shift of view for most leaders. A project’s success is not just influenced by your actions, it is influenced by the actions and reactions of those involved. Therefore, it is more important to understand how your efforts interact with others, in order to influence the project’s success. Individuals are part of a larger system that most perceive only

dimly, losing sight of the big picture. Figure 1 is an illustrative example of such an organizational structure. CIOs can shift their mindset (see Figure 1):

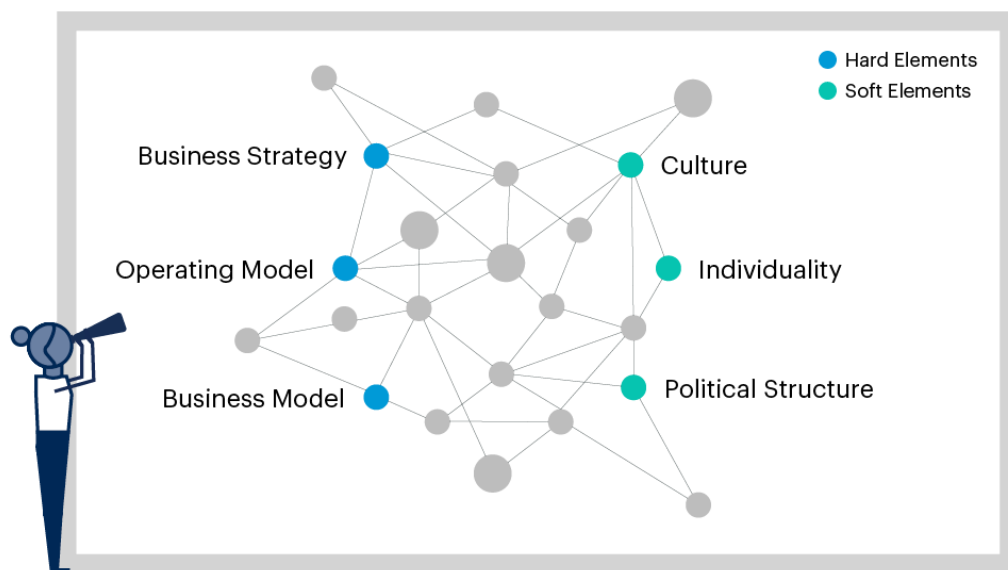
1. Diagnose system relationships
2. Ask powerful questions to understand the resistance within the system
3. Parcel and sequence their strategy increasing the feasibility of the overall transformation
4. Emphasize the holistic value of change

Figure 1: Four Steps to Seeing the Big Picture



Four Steps to Seeing the Big Picture

Organization Systemic Structure; Illustrative Example



Source: Gartner
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Analysis

Diagnose System Relationships

The relationship between the soft and hard elements is what creates the big picture when dealing with transformation. CIOs construct a biased perception of change when they focus on isolated aspects of the organizational system. As an example, imagine a CIO has just outsourced part of the IT organization and plans to have the outsourced counterpart function in precisely the same manner as the old structure. The CIO might believe there is no need to alter corporate governance since processes are left unaltered. However, in change, relationships are vital. What the CIO could

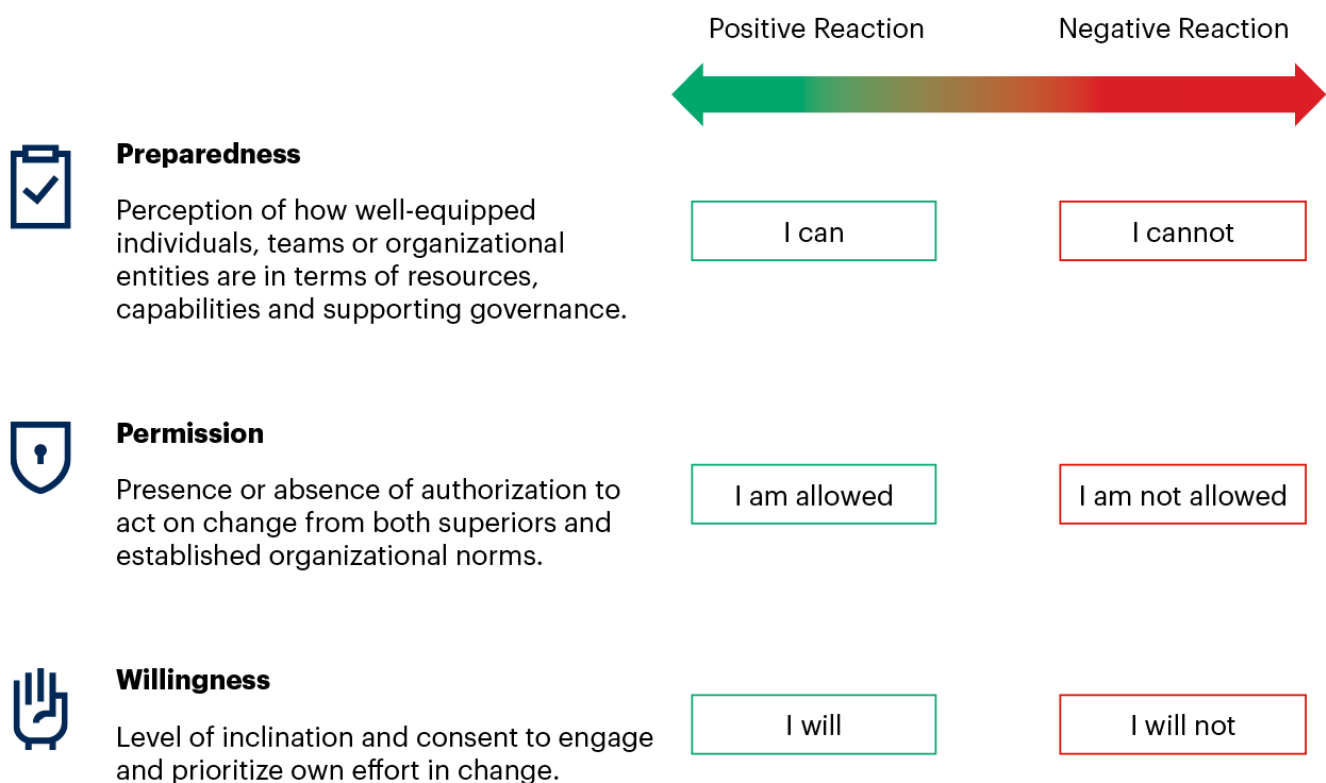
be missing is that the organization distrusts the outsourced institution and, by not explicitly addressing it, the system will resist. In this example, the CIO does not understand the reason for nor the source of this resistance. Failing to see the big picture leads CIOs to employ the wrong tactics, send conflicting messages and act incoherently, thus unintentionally derailing the change initiative.

There are three basic binary reactions CIOs need to recognize, preemptively plan for and act upon that will contain unnecessary friction in the organizational system. These are **preparedness**, **permission** and **willingness** (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Basic Binary Reactions to Change



Basic Binary Reactions to Change



Source: Gartner
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Preemptive planning can help CIOs prepare in advance for potential resistance. Understanding where the critical pain points lie is essential for designing a winning implementation strategy. To do so, transformational leaders should ask themselves the following yes/no questions. Every “no” response contains a potential pocket of friction.

Preparedness

- Are there enough resources available to implement change in the proposed timeline?
- Are all the capabilities necessary to implement change available?

- Do the functional teams have the required hard and soft skills and competencies?
- Is the available budget enough?
- Is this change initiative free from competing or conflicting priorities?
- Are the governance and indicators in place to oversee and support the transformation process?
- Are the governance and indicators transparent to all involved?

Permission

- Are all the critical stakeholders sponsoring the initiative?
- Have your critical stakeholders empowered their managers/department leaders?
- Is the change aligned with existing job descriptions?
- Is the initiative aligned to the existing legal and compliance regulations?
- Are all procedures adjusted to support the change in terms of scope and timing?
- Is this change risk-free for the company brand?

Willingness

- Is the initiative aligned to your stakeholders' professional corporate goals and objectives?
- Is individual compensation linked to the objectives of the project?
- Are there incentives in individual performance (bonus, variable compensation, promotion, etc.)?
- Does the project align with, or promote, the personal goals of critical stakeholders?
- Is there a belief/trust that the project will be successful?
- Is there trust in you as a leader?
- Have you been empowered by your critical stakeholders to lead this initiative?
- Are the objectives of your critical stakeholders aided by your leadership?

Preemptive planning does not exempt the transformation from facing resistance. Change is not a linear process, mostly because of systemic resistance. Resistance is what keeps things together. It is not inherently good or bad; it just is. There will always be a place and time for it. Therefore, the idea of eliminating resistance completely is ridiculous. For this reason, leaders also need to be prepared to identify and react to unplanned systemic friction as it presents itself.

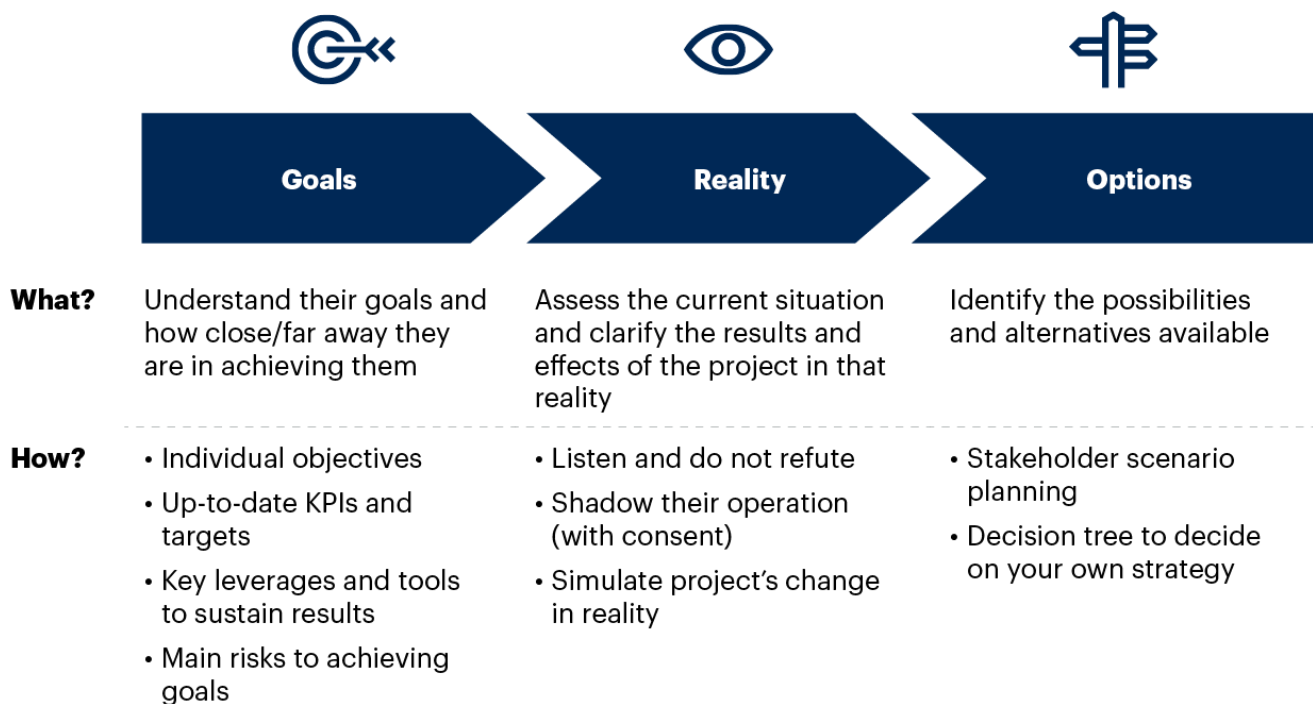
Ask Powerful Questions to Understand the Resistance Within the System

Resistance can manifest itself in different ways (see [Identify and Manage Employee Resistance to Change](#)). Most leaders, when facing resistance, push harder. Yet, the harder you push, the harder the system pushes back. This strategy can sometimes promote short-term change, but the consistent use of force strains relationships and is not sustainable in the long run. The better strategy is to avoid direct conflict and negotiate a middle ground. In most large systems, in order for you to succeed, others must succeed as well. ¹ Artful CIOs, rather than pushing harder, discern the source of resistance, understanding their opposition’s perspective and positioning. These leaders adapt their implementation strategy and avoid unnecessary resistance by setting aside conflict and actively exploring their opponent’s goals, reality and options (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Positioning Depends on Goals, Reality and Options



Positioning Depends on Goals, Reality and Options



Source: Gartner
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Questions are commonly used to elicit information, yet, especially in tense moments, CIOs use questions to make statements rather than ask. Demanding or implying what you want in the form of a question is useless. You must ask powerful questions to engage in a two-way conversation (see [Leading After Layoffs: CIOs Must Reengage to Support Recovery](#)).

Only the other person can tell you truthfully why they/their department are resisting, so you need to stop talking and start listening.

Now, people are not always explicit in their intentions or are often unaware of them. So, more important than the answer per se is understanding the blind spots. Given the systemic nature of organizations and their complexity, there might be critical hard and soft aspects that the CIO could be missing. Tapping into that knowledge is vital in guaranteeing the success of the implementation. There are *six key aspects when asking powerful questions*:

1. **It takes more than one:** Usually, it takes several questions/interactions before you get your stakeholders' trust and openness.
2. **Ask open questions:** Open questions require descriptive answers, and they open the door to new questions (e.g., "If you were in my place, what are the critical aspects you would look at? What would you have done differently?").
3. **Ask the following: why, what, when, who, how much and how many.** Interrogative questions are powerful in raising awareness of someone's reality. Use caution when using the "why" questions since it can put others on the defensive. Start easy until you feel your stakeholder is comfortable.
4. **Focus on detail:** Questions should begin broadly but then focus increasingly on detail. This can be done by adding a casual follow-up: then what, precisely what will you do, what else and what do you really want?
5. **Avoid leading questions and criticism:** People are not stupid. They can easily catch on when being led or criticized. Not only can this escalate the conflict, but it can also generate biased responses.
6. **Listen:** You might not like or agree with what you are hearing, but perception is reality. By understanding reality from someone else's perspective, you can include mitigating actions in your implementation strategy (see [The SIMPLER Model: How to Lead Better Through a Crisis](#)).

It is important to balance inquiry with advocacy. Powerful questions have to be used wisely. If CIOs go on a question-asking exploration tour, then skepticism, frustration and possibly more resistance will arise. Choose the right moment to ask.

Parcel and Sequence Your Strategy Increasing the Feasibility of the Overall Transformation

Transformations are ambitious endeavors. They rarely fail because of bad design but rather from an unrealistic implementation strategy. The lack of systemic vision may lead companies to push too hard on the wrong things or not push hard enough on the right things. The BBC launched an ambitious digital media initiative (DMI) in 2008 aimed at fundamentally changing how they both managed data and provided content to audiences while reducing costs. After a sequence of

mishaps, the project was shut down in 2013. The consultancy firm PwC provided a postmortem analysis on the case showing that while technological advancement was prioritized, cultural alignment, including the operating model's adjustment, was not. Consequently, the BBC had to write off £98.3 million in unusable technology assets on top of the loss in invested value. ²

Other companies fail by embracing more than their organizations can bear, ignoring the old organization's adjustment period to embrace the new. Take GE as an example. In 2015, it created a new digital business unit with the central goal of turning the company into a technology powerhouse. Despite the massive investment and best-in-class talent, the digital initiative failed. GE was too large to transform all at once. Their ambitions clouded their judgment in terms of their actual implementation capabilities, leading them to take on more than they could take in. ³

A sound assessment of an organization's readiness for change is a fundamental building block for successful transformations. Designing a winning strategy will require CIOs to actively listen to systemic resistance and build an evidence-based evaluation of the real capabilities for change. There are a few key hard and soft factors CIOs need to consider when designing their strategies:

Hard Factors

- Size of process/system gap to change (e.g., as-is/to-be analysis)
- Projection of expected impact on results in terms of both timing and value
- Resource analysis based on availability, skills and competencies
- Budget analysis
- Mapping of non-negotiable project interdependencies (e.g., training is necessary before go-live, bidding process before contract signing)

Soft Factors

- Size of cultural gap to change (see [Accelerate Culture Change Using the From/To/Because Model](#))
- Level of maturity with project dynamics
- Success/failure history with transformation projects
- Stakeholder level of interest as an influence on change (see [Case Study: Stakeholder Disagreement Maps \(Panduit\)](#))

Once these factors have been mapped, the CIO should define the sequence and speed of the implementation. Keep in mind the importance of starting with strong quick wins and slowly ramping up the project through carefully thought-out pilots and phased rollouts. When defining the sequence, consider that transforming a business is a long-run endeavor. Therefore, CIOs need to be

prepared to adapt and shift their strategies, as resistance and unaccounted-for difficulties arise. Such flexibility will depend on the project's critical activities that can make or break an implementation. The critical activities need to be analyzed and made visible to key stakeholders from the start of the transformation. Yet, even by designing an agile and adaptable strategy, many CIOs mistakenly think that change ends when systems are up and running. Transforming culture and behavior needs time to stick. Therefore, when building the strategy, do not forget to include a cultural ramp-up. During this period, in addition to classical monitoring via KPIs, individuals need to be continuously reminded of the value of change to keep them from falling back into old habits.

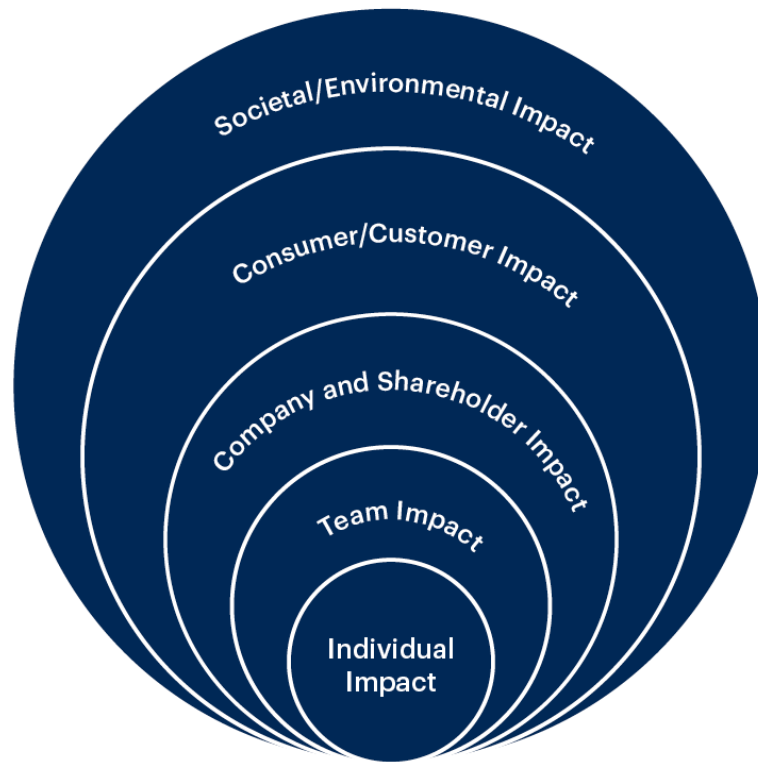
Emphasize the Holistic Value of Change

Habits cannot be created, only transformed. ⁴ Transforming old habits into new ones and sustaining them requires effort. It might seem surprising to some, but even when there is a clear and compelling rationale for change, too often it is not sufficient for growth. Financial returns justify transformations from a corporate standpoint, but the question “why change?” also needs to be addressed from a human perspective. People can only genuinely engage in projects that directly impact them and what they care about most. Creating a compelling case for change means addressing the value of change holistically by evaluating the impact on society, the environment, consumers/customers, the company/shareholder, teams and individuals (see Figure 4). Incorporate these aspects to the project's pitch and communication strategy, adapting the “what's in it for me and my team” message to the different targeted stakeholder groups. Best-in-class companies go a step further and link their transformation targets to each of these objectives, providing total transparency to their case for change.

Figure 4: Holistic Value Creates a Compelling Case for Change



Holistic Value Creates a Compelling Case for Change



Source: Gartner
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Exploring the value of change holistically will help leaders design compelling stories for change. By addressing the aspects your employees care about most, you will appeal to their intrinsic motivation and facilitate their engagement. After all, we all fight for the things we truly care about.

Evidence

- ¹ [The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization](#), Doubleday.
- ² [‘Confusion’ Led to BBC Digital Project Failure](#), BBC.
- ³ [10 Reasons Why Organizational Change Fails](#), IMD.
- ⁴ [The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business](#), Random House.

Recommended by the Author

[The SIMPLER Model: How to Lead Better Through a Crisis](#)

[Accelerate Culture Change Using the From/To/Because Model](#)

[Leading After Layoffs: CIOs Must Reengage to Support Recovery](#)

[Identify and Manage Employee Resistance to Change](#)

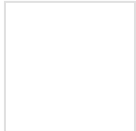
[Case Study: Stakeholder Disagreement Maps \(Panduit\)](#)

[Case Study: Cultural Translation in M&A Communications \(Piedmont Healthcare\)](#)

[Open Source Change: Making Change Management Work](#)

[Align People and Organizational Factors to the Digital Strategy to Achieve Successful Outcomes](#)

Supporting Initiatives



CIO Leadership, Culture and People



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