Prosci’s top-10 action steps for managing resistance

The methods listed below are intended to help create desire in employees. The first step before using any of the methods suggested below is to ensure that each employee is aware of the need for change as discussed in the ADKAR model. This is a prerequisite before addressing an employee's desire to support and participate in a change.

Part of building awareness around the need for change is ensuring that business leaders have created an urgency for change with employees. This is part of sharing why the change is needed and what is the risk of not changing.

The methods provided here are techniques that have been demonstrated to work by other organizations. However, it is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach. The combination of a specific change, a specific organization and each unique employee will result in a course of action that is unique to each person and the situation. In addition, some employees are motivated by positive opportunities, while others are motivated by avoidance of negative consequences. Carefully choose the right approach for your situation.

Method 1 - Listen and understand objections

Method 2 - Focus on the "what" and let go of the "how"

Method 3 - Remove barriers

Method 4 - Provide simple, clear choices and consequences

Method 5 - Create hope

Method 6 - Show the benefits in a real and tangible way

Method 7 - Make a personal appeal

Method 8 - Convert the strongest dissenters

Method 9 - Create a sacrifice

Method 10 - Use money or power
Method 1 - Listen and understand objections

A critical step any manager should take when creating desire to change is to listen. The power of true listening and empathy is often underestimated. In many cases employees simply want to be heard and to voice their objections. Understanding these objections can often provide a clear path toward resolution. Listening can also help managers identify misunderstandings about the change. Rumors and background conversation often produce incorrect messages and wrong perceptions. Only through listening can managers identify these wrong perceptions and provide a correct and clear story about the change.

Caution: When engaging in this process, managers should avoid debating or arguing with employees. The goal is to listen and understand, and provide clarity about the change.

Method 2 - Focus on the "what" and let go of the "how"

In some types of changes, it is effective for managers to let go of the "how" and simply communicate "what" needs to change. This process transfers ownership of the solution to employees. Managers can share a clear vision of the end state, along with specific goals and timelines with employees. Employees then take on the task of achieving that vision. Employee involvement and ownership naturally builds desire to support the change, and ensures that employee objections are addressed in their solution. This technique is especially useful in small groups or departments in which the change falls within the scope of that group, and has little or no impact on other groups or departments.

Caution: If any combination of the following characteristics is present, then this process is more difficult to implement:

- a change becomes significantly large such that cross-department coordination and design is required
- the total number of employees is sufficiently large that they all cannot reasonably be involved in and take ownership of the design
- the design of the future state is already pre-determined and cannot be changed
- the change is dramatic and is happening quickly

Attempts to simulate employee participation through interviews, focus groups and other channels of collecting input from large groups of employees can backfire. Employee input does not equal employee ownership of the change. Input from employees is a good and necessary process, but will not necessarily create a desire to change when direct involvement and ownership are absent.
Method 3 - Remove barriers

Desire to change can be inhibited by obstacles or barriers. These barriers may relate to family, personal issues, physical limitations or money. The first step when using this method is to have followed Method 1 so that you fully understand the individual situation with this employee. What may appear to be resistance or objections to the change may be disguised barriers that the employee cannot see past. Identify the barriers clearly. Determine ways that the business may be able to address these barriers.

For example, if a change involves assigning a manager to a new location that requires commuting 2-hours each way, then a barrier for this manager may be a son or daughter who does not want to leave their current school (nor does the parent wish to miss the activities of their child). By allowing this manager to arrange a home office for two or three days each week, then the barrier to change related to family impact may be removed.

Method 4 - Provide simple, clear choices and consequences

Building desire is ultimately about choice. Managers can facilitate this process by being clear about the choices employees have during change. In many cases, the actual change may be out of the control of front-line supervisors and managers. In these cases, it is very important that managers communicate in simple and clear terms what the choices and consequences are for each employee.

The City of Denver, Colorado, recently began one of the largest road construction projects in the state to widen the primary interstate highway that runs through the city. This project is called T-Rex. The design and building process were carefully planned many years before construction actually began. The construction crews on this project did not have control over the final design nor the construction sequence. Commuters certainly did not have control. However, this project was a role model for managing complex change. In this case the citizens of Denver and the surrounding areas were those impacted by the change. The project team created an ongoing communication campaign involving TV, radio and other media to:

1. Let people know what would happen and when.
2. Provide alternate routes and choices for commuting into Denver.
3. Share the consequences of taking certain routes at certain times, including providing ongoing information about the expected delays along each route.

In this example, the change was going to happen no matter what. Yet, by communicating the choices to commuters and the potential consequences of each choice, some degree of control is given back to these commuters. That is also true of changes at work. Even when the change is defined and outside of local control, by providing simple and clear choices along with the consequences of those choices, you can put the ownership and control back into the hands of employees.
Method 5 - Create hope

Many people will respond to the opportunity for a better future. They want to have hope. Managers can create desire to change by sharing their passion for change, creating excitement and enthusiasm, and creating hope in a better future for employees and for the organization. People will follow a leader that can create hope and whom they respect and trust. This method is the most effective when executive leadership, through visible and active participation with employees, creates hope and energy around the future state.

Caution: Creating hope takes a special kind of person. We have all known individuals in our lives and throughout history who have the traits of leadership that cause people to hope and to follow. They create a vision and build promise for a better future. Public figures include John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Gandhi. Leaders with these qualities are rare but not absent in both government and in business today. If your organization has this type of leadership, then building desire to change becomes much easier.

Method 6 - Show the benefits in a real and tangible way

For some employees seeing is believing. Demonstrating the benefits of change in a real and tangible way can create desire with employees. Examples could include:

- Sharing case studies of other companies who have successfully completed a similar change (and the results they achieved).
- Inviting guests to provide personal testimonials of how a similar type of change resulted in success for their organization.
- Visibly demonstrating the success of pilot programs or trials within your own organization (share small wins and celebrate success publicly).

Making the change real and demonstrating that success is possible can remove doubts and fears that some employees feel about change.
Method 7 - Make a personal appeal

When a manager has a close working relationship with an employee, using a personal appeal to support the change can create desire within an employee. A personal appeal works best with honest, open relationships where there is a high degree of trust and respect. A personal appeal may sound like:

"I believe in this change."
"It is important to me."
"I want your support."
"If you go with me on this, I will make sure this works out."

In a personal appeal, there is both an emotional component and an expectations component ("I'm counting on you"). The emotional component is part of each person's desire to support the people they are close to and whom they trust. The "I'm counting on you" component has built in a sense that the employee will be taken care of in the future, regardless of how things turn out with the change. Both of these elements can build desire to support change.

Method 8 - Convert the strongest dissenters

Within every organization there exist outspoken opinion leaders. When one or more of these strong and vocal employees are against change, they can negatively influence many other employees within the organization. By targeting these strongest dissenters, managers can use special tactics and interventions suggested here to convert these employees to support the change. By doing so, the strongest dissenters can become your strongest advocates. They are often equally vocal in their support as they were in their resistance.

By focusing your energy on a few strong resistors rather than on large groups of employees, two objectives are achieved for building desire to change. First, you regain some control over the powerful background conversation that takes place around the coffee pot and during breaks between employees. Second, you gain sponsors of change that are already influential with their peers. If you are not successful in converting these strongest dissenters, then Method 9 may be a viable option.
Method 9 - Create a sacrifice

Often termed the "sacrificial lamb," removing a key manager that is demonstrating resistance to change sends a powerful signal to the organization as a whole. The message is:

- They are serious about this change.
- Resistance will not be tolerated.
- The consequences for not moving ahead with the organization are real and severe.

This method for creating desire to change is best used with a "Group 3" employee as discussed earlier. Often times these employees would be leaving the organization soon anyway. It is not necessary for this to be a negative experience for the employee that is leaving. Termination packages, early retirement offerings or a number of other programs can make this process good for the manager leaving, and at the same time send the right message to the organization.

Does this always need to be perceived by other employees as a harsh course of action? A recent case study shows how this method was used in a way that was not hurtful to the organization or the person leaving. A senior level manager at a financial services firm was outspoken and critical of changes planned in both processes and systems. The resistance continued long enough that many employees came to the conclusion that this change would not happen after all. They had learned from past experience that if this key manager was opposed to the change, then it did not happen. The resistance was so plain that even an external consultant commented on the risk. Since the culture and values in this organization were very family-oriented (we take care of one another), imagine the surprise when the CEO announced that this resistant manager would be leaving the organization. What was notable in this case, however, was how the termination was presented in public. The manager was being given a celebration send-off and early retirement plan for his long-standing contribution to the company. The separation was positive for the manager, and, in his own way, the CEO sent a message to the organization. That message was that we can manage change and continue to live our values.

Caution: Organizations should not look for a sacrificial lamb as a standard practice. This approach should be used after other options have failed and the change is at risk. When fear is created in an organization, this fear can play out in both negative and positive ways. Once a decision like this has been made, the organization needs to carefully manage the fallout from this approach. Be sure to involve HR and your legal department before using this approach.
**Method 10 - Use money or power**

When mid-level or senior managers are resistant to change, yet are critical to the success of the change and the organization, two incentives may be required to secure their support. These incentives would be used when all other methods for building desire have failed.

1. Increase their compensation or create a bonus program such that they are directly rewarded for the successful completion of the change.
2. Offer a promotion to a position they desire.

In short, bargain. When a manager is necessary to ensure a smooth transition, and assuming that other barriers, obstacles or objections have been removed, then at some point you have to decide what you are willing to give up in order to gain their support. What is their contribution worth to the business, and how can the business negotiate for this endorsement and support. This negotiation should be specific on the actions and behaviors that are expected to support the change.

An example of the need for this negotiation is with mergers and acquisitions. In these types of changes, key managers are necessary for successful transition. However, some of these key managers may have opposed the buy-out or merger. These special circumstances require different methods for keeping these critical managers on-board. Money and position are two tools that may create a desire to support the change in these circumstances.