

CHANGE THAT STAYS · CHAPTER FOUR

We Tried This in 2016

What an organisation calls resistance is often its most accurate forecast of how a change will come undone.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

What an organisation calls resistance is often its most accurate forecast of how a change will come undone. It is half past two on a Wednesday in January, and the canteen at the bakery still smells of the morning's bread. The briefing on the new production planning system has just ended. For an hour the operations manager, eight months into the job, has shown thirty people how the system will schedule every run from the sales forecast, so that the ovens are loaded by data rather than by the paper sheet the night supervisor has kept on a clipboard for as long as anyone can remember. There were questions about passwords and about training dates. There were no objections. Now the night supervisor, twenty-six years on the site, is standing by the urn with a mug of tea, and as the operations manager passes she says, not unkindly, We did this in 2016. It lasted till Easter.

CHAPTER FOUR

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Half past two, the canteen

It is half past two on a Wednesday in January, and the canteen at the bakery still smells of the morning's bread. The briefing on the new production planning system has just ended. For an hour the operations manager, eight months into the job, has shown thirty people how the system will schedule every run from the sales forecast, so that the ovens are loaded by data rather than by the paper sheet the night supervisor has kept on a clipboard for as long as anyone can remember. There were questions about passwords and about training dates. There were no objections. Now the night supervisor, twenty-six years on the site, is

standing by the urn with a mug of tea, and as the operations manager passes she says, not unkindly, *We did this in 2016. It lasted till Easter.*

The operations manager smiles and says something about how much the software has improved. Her face is warm. Walking back to her office she has already decided what the sentence was: resistance, from the person she was warned about, and a problem to be managed. She will route the training round the night shift for a few weeks and let the results persuade them. She is a composite, as is the supervisor, drawn from the way these afternoons are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no bakery is meant.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon has a sentence for the moment by the urn, and it is one of the most practically useful in his writing on organisations.[23] In a chapter on what unmourned loss does to a workplace, it says:

> *Change resistance. One of the most common complaints in organizational life is that "people resist change." Entire consulting practices are built on helping organizations overcome this resistance. But here is a truth that most change management frameworks miss: much of what presents as resistance to change is actually unprocessed grief from the last change.*

This chapter makes one claim. What an organisation calls resistance is very often the most accurate forecast it holds of how a change will come undone, carried by the people who watched the last one fail. A change that routes round that forecast meets it again months later, as the old way returning, and a change that hears it first can be designed not to.

A story told from one side

The word *resistance* has a long history in organisational writing, and in 2008 Jeffrey Ford, Laurie Ford and Angelo D'Amelio pointed out that the history had been written almost entirely from one side.[24] The prevailing view, they argued, tells a story that favours the people leading a change. It treats resistance as an irrational and dysfunctional reaction, located "over there", in the people on the receiving end. They set out to tell the rest of the story, and it has two parts. The first is that change agents contribute to resistance through their own actions and inactions. The second is that resistance can be a resource for change.

The first part is uncomfortable in a familiar way. The paper's examples of what leaders do to produce the resistance they then complain about are, as remembered from the full text, ordinary ones: agreements made during earlier changes and later broken, trust damaged and never repaired, explanations that answered the questions leaders wanted asked rather than the ones people had.[25] The bakery's 2016 system was introduced, presumably, by someone who promised that the night shift's knowledge would be built into it, and then left before Easter. The supervisor's sentence by the urn is in part a report on that promise.

The second part is the one this chapter is about. If resistance is a resource, it is because an objection carries information the change agent does not have. It may be information about the work, about the past, or about the people who will have to carry the change on the nights nobody from the project is watching. Sandy Piderit, writing in 2000, added a refinement that helps in practice.[26] People's responses to a change, she argued, are rarely just for or against. They are ambivalent, with thoughts, feelings and intentions that need not point the same way. The night supervisor may think the system is a good idea, feel tired at the prospect of another one, and intend to keep her clipboard just in case. Calling all of that resistance throws most of it away.

Santa Anna's canon describes the defensive reflex in organisational terms that a leader can recognise in herself: "When a change initiative threatens the organization's identity, the organization behaves like a body encountering a pathogen. It resists, neutralizes, or isolates the "foreign" element." The canon means the organisation resisting the change. But the operations manager walking back to her office is doing the same thing to the supervisor. She has classified the objection as foreign and is already planning to isolate it.



Seventy-nine studies

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Seventy-nine studies

The question of why people react to change as they do has been studied quantitatively for sixty years, and in 2011 Shaul Oreg, Maria Vakola and Achilles Armenakis reviewed the whole of that literature.[27] Of the studies published between 1948 and 2007, seventy-nine met their criteria. From them the authors built a model with three parts. People's reactions are attitudes with three dimensions: what they think, what they feel and what they intend to do. The reactions have antecedents of two kinds. Some exist before the change arrives: the characteristics of the people receiving it and the internal context of the organisation. Others

belong to the change itself: how it is carried out, what benefit or harm people expect from it, and what it actually changes. And the reactions have consequences, for work and for people's lives.

The model is a synthesis of correlational studies, and it cannot say what causes what in any particular bakery. But its shape is a corrective to the canteen. Of the things it finds associated with how people react, only one group is about the person. The rest are about the organisation's history, the way the change is introduced and what it will really do to people's work. A leader who hears an objection and thinks only about the objector is reading one box of a three-box model.

Read the bakery against it. The internal context includes 2016. The change process includes a briefing at which there were no objections, which a more experienced manager might have read as a warning rather than a success. The perceived harm is specific and, as it turns out, accurate: the night supervisor knows that the supermarket's Thursday orders change after the forecast is run, and that in 2016 the system scheduled the Thursday bake from figures that were wrong by the time the ovens were lit. Her clipboard is where the correction lives. She has no reason to think the new system knows any of that, because nobody has asked her.

The silence at the briefing deserves a second look. Thirty people heard a plan that changes how the ovens are loaded, and the only questions were about passwords. A room that has no objections to a large change has usually decided that objections are not wanted, or not useful, or not safe, and has saved them for the corridor. The canteen by the urn is the bakery's version of what [*Where the Flow Stops* calls the meeting after the meeting]({{BOOK:orgdev-flow}}), the second conversation in which an organisation says what it actually thinks. The supervisor's sentence was not the start of a resistance campaign. It was the only part of the briefing that told the truth about the plan's prospects.

The last change

The canon's claim about grief deserves more than its first sentence, because the rest of the passage explains the supervisor's tone better than any account of her personality. Unmourned loss, it says, becomes the resistance leaders find so frustrating, "not because people are opposed to the new direction, but because they haven't been allowed to complete their relationship with the old one."

What did the night shift lose in 2016? Perhaps less than a layoff and more than nothing. A way of working that they were good at was declared obsolete in a briefing. A sheet that one of them had refined over years was replaced by a screen. When the screen failed at Easter, the sheet came back without acknowledgment, and the people who had kept it going through the failure were neither thanked nor asked what they had learned. None of that is dramatic. All of it is still in the room in January, by the urn.

The Luminous 100, the house's reading of the frameworks consultancies sell, keeps the distinction that best explains this, from William Bridges: the model "Distinguishes between change (external, situational) and

transition (internal, psychological)."[28] The change in 2016 happened in a week. The transition, the inner work of letting go of the old way, was never given any time at all, and so it was never finished. The 100's own reading of Bridges says what an unfinished ending could become if it were honoured: "Living-systems awareness shows that the Ending isn't death but composting". The nutrients of the old way, the knowledge in the clipboard, are exactly what the new system needs.

The canon describes a practice for making that history visible, and it is simpler than it sounds. A team draws, on a long sheet of paper, a timeline of the significant losses and changes it has lived through, and stands in front of it. In the canon's account of one such session, seeing them all together "revealed the sheer *volume* of unprocessed grief the system was carrying." A leader new to an organisation, as the operations manager is, has not lived through any of it. Everyone else has. That asymmetry is most of what she heard by the urn.

If the operations manager asked around, quietly, about 2016, she would probably find a story with three parts, because stories like it usually have them. The system was introduced by a manager who left soon afterwards. It worked well on the day shift, where the orders were steady, and badly on nights, where the Thursday changes landed. And when it was abandoned, nobody said so: the clipboard came back, and the system was left running on a screen in the office, unused, until the licence lapsed. Each part is a lesson about this year's change. The first says who will be left holding it. The second says where it will fail. The third says how the failure will be hidden.

What the objection is protecting

There is a further layer, and it is the one most useful to a leader because it turns a complaint into a question. The developmental psychologists Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey called it immunity to change.[29] Santa Anna's canon summarises their idea with care: "what looks like resistance to change is often a brilliantly organized self-protective system." People who do not change, the canon goes on, are often running a hidden commitment, a quiet dedication to protecting themselves or others from something they fear would happen if they did.

The canon's own use of the idea is the important part. It "reframes resistance not as an obstacle to be overcome but as *information to be understood*", and it gives the questions that follow: "*What is this person protecting? What developmental achievement is at stake? What would need to be true for this edge to feel safe enough to approach?*"

Ask the first of those about the night supervisor and the answer arrives quickly. She is protecting the Thursday bake. More precisely, she is protecting the supermarket order, the customers on the shelf on Friday morning, and the twelve people on her shift who in 2016 spent four Thursday nights re-baking a run the system had got wrong. Her clipboard is a safety system, built by hand, and her objection is a report that the new design has no equivalent. The canon's chapter on the parts of any system that guard it puts the

organisational version gently: "these all arose for good reasons. They've been protecting the organization from genuine dangers." The danger the clipboard guards against is real. It is also, almost certainly, one the new system could be configured to guard against too, if anyone knew it existed.

Not every objection is right, and it would be a disservice to pretend otherwise. Sometimes the person by the urn is protecting a way of working that suits her and costs everyone else, or defending a skill the new system genuinely makes unnecessary. The canon's questions still help, because they separate the two. An objection that protects a real danger names the danger, specifically, when asked. An objection that protects a position tends to stay general. Either way the leader learns something she needs, and either way the person who objected has been treated as someone whose view of the work counts. That second effect lasts long after the particular argument is forgotten.

That is the link between this chapter and the routine that comes back under pressure, read in Chapter 3 in an office where the screen still opened on the old tab. In that office the old way returned because nobody changed what the work answered to. In the bakery, if the objection is routed round, the old way will return for a better reason. The clipboard will come back on the first Thursday the forecast is wrong, because it is the only thing on site that works on Thursdays.



The conversation before the design

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The conversation before the design

The practice this chapter describes is a conversation, held before a change's design is fixed, with the people most likely to say it will fail. It is called the objection conversation, and its order matters more than its wording.

It is held early, one to one or in a very small group, and somewhere that is not the canteen after a briefing. The operations manager asks the supervisor for an hour, and says plainly why: that she heard the sentence

about 2016, that she thinks the supervisor may know something the project does not, and that she would rather hear it now than in March.

Then three questions, in order. The first is about the work: *what will this break?* Not whether the system is a good idea, which invites an argument, but where, specifically, it will fail on a real night. The answer will be concrete, and it will often be right. The second is about the past: *what happened last time, and what did it cost the people who were there?* This is the question that lets the transition be spoken, and it should be asked with genuine curiosity, and without any defence of whoever ran 2016. The third is about what to keep: *what does the old way do that the new one must also do?* This is where the clipboard's knowledge enters the design: the Thursday correction, the order of the runs when an oven is down, the warning signs that the forecast is off.

Picture it held. It is nine on a Sunday evening, at the start of the night shift, in the supervisor's small office off the bakery floor, because that is where she is most at ease and the operations manager has come to her. The clipboard is on the desk. The first question takes a while to land, because the supervisor expects to be persuaded, and when she realises she is being asked, she picks up the clipboard and turns it round. The Thursday column has two sets of figures in it, one in black and one in pencil. The pencil is the supermarket's call-off, which arrives at four in the afternoon, after the forecast has run. In 2016 the system had no pencil. The second question takes longer, and the answer is not about software at all; it is about four nights of re-baking and a manager who said thank you to the day shift. The third question produces a list of six things the clipboard does, and two of them are things nobody in the project had heard of.

What happens next decides whether the conversation was worth having. The design changes where the objection was right, visibly, and the person who raised it is told, and credited by name where it counts. Where the design will not change, the reason is given plainly, once. And the objector is asked to help with the part she knows best: to walk the Thursday bake with the project team, or to test the system on her shift before anyone else's. The canon's advice for when a change meets its old patterns in a group is the right register for every step of this: "Shadow does not yield to judgment. It yields to patience, to safety, to the repeated demonstration that honesty is valued even when it is imperfect, incomplete, and trembling."

The mistakes are easy to see in advance. The conversation is held after the design is fixed, so that it can only produce disappointment. It becomes a persuasion session, in which the leader explains why the objection is wrong. The leader hears the forecast and ignores the history, or hears the history and treats it as therapy and the forecast as noise. Or the objector's knowledge is taken into the design and her name is left out of it, which teaches the whole shift that speaking up is a way to have your work taken. Chapter 7 carries the conversation as a run sheet, with the three questions, the ways each is commonly misheard and a page for recording what changed.

There is a quieter gain, and it is often the largest. The person who said a change would fail, and was asked why, and saw the design change, is very often the person who will keep it going when the project team has moved on. That is not a guarantee. It is a pattern worth watching for, because the question of who carries a

change once its sponsor has gone is the one on which most improvements finally turn, and, as Chapter 5 finds, the person who carried it is very often not the person who launched it.

The objection conversation, in practice

The article this chapter began as ended in the canteen in April. The book can go further, into the finer points a leader meets when she holds these conversations in her own organisation, and the first is whom to ask.

Three groups, and they overlap. The people with the longest memory of the work, because they carry the history of the last change. The people already described, in the project's own conversations, as likely to resist, because the description usually means they have said something the project did not want to hear. And the people who were silent at the briefing, especially the experienced ones, because silence from someone who knows the work is rarely agreement. In a team of thirty, that is usually four to six conversations. They take an hour each, and they are the cheapest hours in the whole change.

The second point is timing, and the rule is strict: before the design is fixed. A conversation held after the system is configured can still produce goodwill, but it cannot produce a better design, and the person asked will know it within ten minutes. If the design is already fixed when the leader arrives, as the operations manager's nearly was, the honest move is to say so and to ask which parts most need to change before go-live.

The third is the place. The conversation goes to the objector, on her ground and at her hours: the night supervisor's office at the start of a shift, a quiet corner of the floor, not the leader's office and never a meeting room booked for the purpose. The difference in what is said is large.

The fourth is how each question is commonly misheard. *What will this break?* is heard as an invitation to argue that the change is a bad idea, and some people will take it that way at first. The leader steers back, gently, to specifics: where, on which night, with which order. *What happened last time?* is heard as an invitation to complain, and it is, partly, which is why it is asked. The leader listens to the end without defending anyone, and then asks what the person learned. *What does the old way do that the new one must also do?* is the question people most often cannot answer straight away, because the old way's functions are habits to them, not functions. Asking them to walk through a hard night, step by step, usually brings the answer out.

The fifth is sorting what comes back. *Where the Flow Stops* divides what an organisation says in its corridors into three kinds of sentence: forecasts of what will happen, preferences about what someone would do instead, and grievances about what something has cost before. The same sorting works here. Forecasts go into the design, tested where possible. Preferences are weighed and answered. Grievances are taken seriously as

history and separated from the forecast they usually contain; the history is acknowledged, and the forecast is tested.

The sixth is the group version, for a team with a heavy history. The canon's loss timeline, a long sheet on which a team marks the changes and losses it has lived through, is a way of letting a whole team say what the supervisor said by the urn. It needs a careful facilitator, an hour and a half, and a clear promise about what happens next: that what the timeline shows will be read before the new design is fixed. It is not therapy and should not be run as therapy. It is the internal context of Oreg's model, drawn on a wall.

The seventh is what to do when the objection is wrong. It still gets an answer, with the reason, and the person is still thanked. If an objection is wrong in a way that shows a fear rather than a fact, the canon's questions apply: what is this person protecting, and what would need to be true for the change to feel safe? Often the answer is a guarantee the change can give: that a skill will still be needed, that a role will not be cut, that the old way will be kept available for a month as a fallback.

The eighth is the record. Every change to the design that came from an objection is written down with the name of the person who raised it, if she agrees, and shown when the change is introduced. This page, more than any other in the project, tells the rest of the team whether speaking up is worth it.

And the last is the invitation. The objectors who were right are asked to help where their knowledge is greatest: to walk the routine at its hardest hour, as Chapter 3 describes, or to test the new way on their own shift. Some will decline, and that is their right. Those who accept are often the people who keep the change once the project has gone, which Chapter 5 takes up. Chapter 6 places the objection conversations in the first month of the ninety days after done, before the walks, and Chapter 7 gives the run sheet and the record as working pages.

The canteen, in April

It is half past two on a Wednesday in April, and the canteen smells of bread. The system went live in March on the day shift and in the second week on nights, with a Thursday correction built into it that the night supervisor wrote out by hand and the project team turned into a rule. On the first Thursday the forecast was wrong, and the rule caught it, and the run was right. The clipboard is in the supervisor's locker. She says she is keeping it for a while.

The operations manager is at the urn. The supervisor stops beside her with a mug and looks at the rota on the wall.

It's past Easter, she says.

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