

## DEALING WITH RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

“Change is the window through which the future enters your life.” Vadim Kotelnikov

Keep in mind that all change will have resistance. That said, there's the 20-60-20 rule for leaders to mind: 20% of the people will go for the change and be early adopters. 20% will resist in some fashion or another (see below) and the other 60% are fence-sitting: looking to see which 20% gets the attention of the leadership. So make sure to lead the 20% who are going, and deal with the resisters using the below strategies. In that way, segments of the 60% who are waiting to see what will happen will see that the change is moving forward. Most of them will support it after they see which way the wind is blowing!

Strategies for dealing with resisters:

Identify the strength of the resistance. The resistance is on a continuum from resistance based in genuine interest about and concern for the organization all the way to the Gandhi Syndrome. The Gandhi Syndrome is when organized, covert and often unsubstantiated efforts to derail the change are undertaken.

For those who are **resisting out of genuine interest** in the well-being of the organization, try the following:

- Address known concerns in your initial communications. Use respectful language and clear argumentation with evidence and hoped for outcomes.
- Be sensitive in your meetings and gather concerns and feedback and address what you can in the meeting. With more difficult questions, address the individual(s) privately.
- Seek out key people to use as a sounding board and privately discuss their concerns. This is not gossiping. This is strategizing about the motives for the concerns and ways to respond.

Resistance driven by genuine concerns is healthy and to be expected. It is important to address these concerns or they will go underground and show up, ratcheted up to the next level.

There are those whose resistance at the first level is not well-addressed. They take their resistance to a new level: RESISTANCE on STEROIDS. Remembering that this exists because the first level of resistance was not addressed, try the following:

- Make sure you know the particular individuals who are resisting and take them aside privately to discuss their concerns. In a parish/diocese, this is always the best first line of communication: private. Try to have a clear case for the change, and to **listen well** as the others express their concerns. Some may be well-founded and the planning for the change most likely took them into consideration. Some may help you avoid mistakes and so should be incorporated into your change management plan. Share those insights and solicit their agreement and perhaps their assistance.
- Make sure you understand whether these individuals have a following and take time to separate real and imagined concerns. In a parish, those with followers are generally well-

known. What is often not done by leaders in this situation is to take the time to analyze the extent of the concerns. This work should have been done in the threat analysis the parish leadership undertook when the change was first considered, and so this analysis at this point just concerns new information. You recognize this stage of resistance when you begin to get those anonymous doomsday messages: “People” are really angry. “Lots of people” are considering leaving the parish. “All the parents” are up in arms. This is where it is important to assess the truth of these statements, look for corroborating or refuting evidence, and set approaches to minimize the fall out. However, this should not come as a surprise and should not ever derail a change effort. Anticipate this and deal with it when it happens. But, if you back away from a change in this situation, you create the climate in the parish that says anyone can mount resistance and get what they want.

- Be firm and where appropriate, address their concerns but make it clear the project is moving forward and you want their support. It is also important to outline (if appropriate) the consequences of a lack of support. In a parish setting, consequences for lack of support may include being asked to step down from leadership or ministerial roles, having the responsibilities removed from them if they refuse to step down, and making it clear that the person no longer holds any position of influence. It may also be that a group of people leave as a result of the change. So be it. Express your sorrow, leave the door open for their return with grace, and move on. For parish staff resisting change, this can be cause for termination in many instances.

**Guerrilla resistance** is exactly what you think it is. It is resistance gone underground and behind your back. Covert, often well planned, it happens on every change project. It is driven by either genuine resisters on steroids who believe you aren't genuine in your efforts or by troublemakers who need the attention. Resistance of this type must be dealt with swiftly and firmly in one or more of the following ways. In a parish, you can identify this kind of resistance by things such as anonymous letters, email chains with incorrect information on them, parking lot conversations after the meeting which abruptly end as you approach, and veiled threats of dire consequences if you proceed. In some instances, sabotage of messages or meetings, boycotts and withholding financial support may also be part of guerilla resistance.

- Take those you suspect of engaging in this kind of covert and planned sabotage aside privately. Seek to understand their concerns and more importantly their motives and discuss what they see as the end state of their actions. In other words, what do they want? And then, what results are they currently getting by their actions? Remembering that this is a parish, it is here that you can surface motives and perspectives that may not be what God intends. Here is where there can be a call for conversion, a chance to name what you see and invite a different response. Be prepared for an angry come-back. People at this stage of resistance in a parish have often disconnected from their identity as a child of God, a Christian etc.
- Explain to them why you are doing what you are doing in clear and uncertain terms. This is where you once again state the case and the methods with certainty. You assure the person that the initiative will continue. You ask for their support or, at the bare minimum, that they cease the active sabotage.
- Make it clear the consequences of their continued behavior. If this is not an employee or someone in leadership, for whom you would put this conversation in writing for follow

up, still make note of the date, time and content of the conversation. Make sure they know what you will accept as appropriate behavior. Also let them know that you will maintain confidentiality around this as long as it stops. Should it continue, you will identify them and call them to a more public accountability for the results of their activities, such as lost money, time and opportunity..

### The Gandhi Syndrome...

Many decades ago, without holding any position, Gandhi brought down the British Empire without firing a single shot. Resisters practicing the Gandhi Syndrome will bring the change initiative to its knees if they aren't dealt with quickly. People practicing the Gandhi Syndrome do not have pure motives. They simply, for whatever their reasons, feel a need to derail the project. Deal with them in one or more of the following ways:

- Make sure you have done your homework on their underhanded deeds and line up support for action in the organization. In a parish, this means getting the precise dates, times and descriptions of activities. It means identifying which people were involved, to the best of your ability. It means taking off the “nice” stance and being willing to fight for the change initiative.
- Confront them with the evidence. Offer a chance for them to respond and stand your ground. This is not the time to cave in, to start negotiating or to bow to threats. If this has really escalated, this is the time for a third party witness to the conversation, for careful note-taking and to have notified diocesan authorities of the situation.
- If this activity is undertaken by a paid staff person, let them know their actions must change immediately or the consequence is termination of employment. For other leaders, let them know their positions in the parish will come to an end immediately. If this activity is being carried out by an individual parishioner, you may wish to have them meet with the Vicar, with another priest, or with you and others on the staff to be heard. After such a meeting, it should be clear to this individual that the change initiative will continue and they will need to either adapt or move on.

Resistance to change on any initiative is very real. Eighty percent of resisters will fall into one of the top two categories. Ten to fifteen percent will fall into category three and the balance in category four. Plan for it and deal with it immediately or you'll be like the old commercial... pay me now or pay me later.

### Reference

Kugler Ed. “Managing Change-Resistance to Change.”  
[http://ezinearticles.com/?expert=Ed\\_Kugler](http://ezinearticles.com/?expert=Ed_Kugler) Accessed 4/11/10

©Deborah W. Stollery 2010 To obtain reprint permission contact [info@conspirita.com](mailto:info@conspirita.com) .