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# Employee Objections to Organizational Change

## A Framework for Addressing Management Responses

*Louise Bringselius*

**Abstract**

Research on organizational change often focuses on the nature and causes of employee objections to change, typically referred to as resistance. This paper explores managerial assumptions in this regard, suggesting a conceptual framework whereby employee objections are understood as whistle-blowing, opinion, resistance/trauma or resistance/disposition. Furthermore, it shows how each position provides legitimacy to a specific management strategy. The framework provides a tool to understand managerial attitudes and strategies, as well as how these attitudes may be understood as rhetoric or self-rationalizations.

Keywords: Organizational Change, Resistance, Resistance to Change, Employee Objections

# Employee Objections to Organizational Change

## A Framework for Addressing Management Responses

*Louise Bringselius*

For the past half-century, most scholars and practitioners have viewed employee resistance as a primary obstacle to effective organizational change (e.g., Avey, Wemsing, & Luthans, 2008). Studies from the 1940s and 1950s (e.g., Kelley & Volkart, 1952; Lewin, 1945, 1947; Marrow, 1957; Zander, 1950), as well as more recent studies (e.g., Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008; Craine, 2007; Fiorelli & Margolis, 1993; Fulmer & Gilkey, 1988; Goldstein, 1989; Kiefer, 2002; Kusstatscher & Cooper, 2005), associate employee objections with feelings of fear, anger, and distress, all of which are viewed as obstacles to organizational change.

Contrasting this view are more recent scholarly contributions, which suggest that employee objections are valuable to organizational change efforts. These studies (e.g., Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008; Ford & Ford, 2009; King & Anderson, 1995; Knowles & Linn, 2004; Merron, 1993; Symon, 2005; Waddell & Sohal, 1998) hold that the concept of resistance ought to be reassessed in order to recognize that resistance may actually be legitimate--or, at least, useful as feedback. Ford and Ford (2009) argue that by seeing resistance as feedback, resistance can be used to help improve the quality of change strategies, thereby also enhancing the prospects of successful implementation. Knowles and Linn (2004), as well as a number of other scholars (e.g., Piderit 2000; Waddel & Sohal, 1998), make similar claims. In 1970, Hirschman contributed to this line of thought by arguing that resistance (voice) should be viewed as a sign of loyalty to the organization, rather than disloyalty. The same position is maintained by Varelius (2008).

Although, it is increasingly stated that employee objections to organizational change can be of value, very limited attention has been directed toward the attitudes and assumptions of managers in regards to employee objections during organizational change efforts. Managerial assumptions about the nature and causes of employee objections may differ substantially, with varying effects.

This conceptual paper discusses managerial assumptions about the nature and causes of employee objections, suggesting a

framework with four managerial positions. Furthermore, it discusses how this positioning may be explained. It is suggested that each position provides legitimacy to a certain managerial strategy, in terms of human resource management (HRM). Hence, the managerial positioning pertaining to employee objections may be understood as self-rationalization (or self-deception, e.g., Audi, 1988; Funkhouser, 2005) or rhetoric (e.g., Flory & Iglesias, 2010; Heath, 2011).

In the paper, a framework with two dimensions, creating four managerial positions, is presented. The four managerial positions pertaining to employee objections proposed here are: whistle-blowing, opinion, resistance/trauma or resistance/disposition. Each managerial position is described under a separate section in the paper followed by the managerial strategy typically employed to deal with employee objections (from that particular managerial position). A discussion follows, and the paper is closed with conclusions.

## A Framework

Managerial attitudes toward employee objections can be defined and categorized in many different ways. In the framework proposed here, two variables are introduced to distinguish between four positions. These two variables are (a) assumptions pertaining to the cause of objections, and (b) assumptions pertaining to the nature of objections.

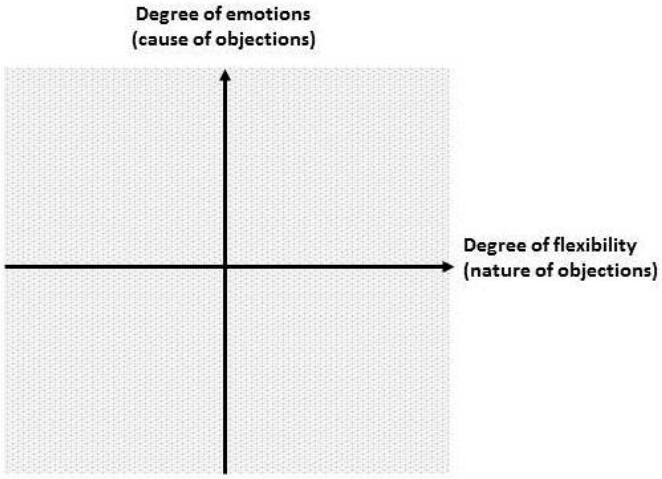


*Figure 1. A framework with two variables to explore managerial assumptions on employee objections.*

In this framework, the cause of objections is translated into the *degree of emotions* (see Figure 1). Employee objections to organizational change can be (assumed to be) more or less based on emotions. This is an important aspect because by referring to objections as emotional, it becomes easier for managers to legitimize ignoring them. Yet, it is almost impossible to make an objective and fully informed statement on what this degree is;

instead, an assumption must be made. It should be mentioned that although the term emotional is not the opposite of rational, some people might associate these concepts with each other. In particular, it is sometimes assumed that emotional reactions are also irrational. Again, this is not necessarily the case.

The nature of resistance is translated as the *degree of flexibility* of the objections, meaning the degree to which the employee is (assumed to be) willing to change his or her objections. Assumptions in this regard will affect the strategies managers employ to deal with employee objections.

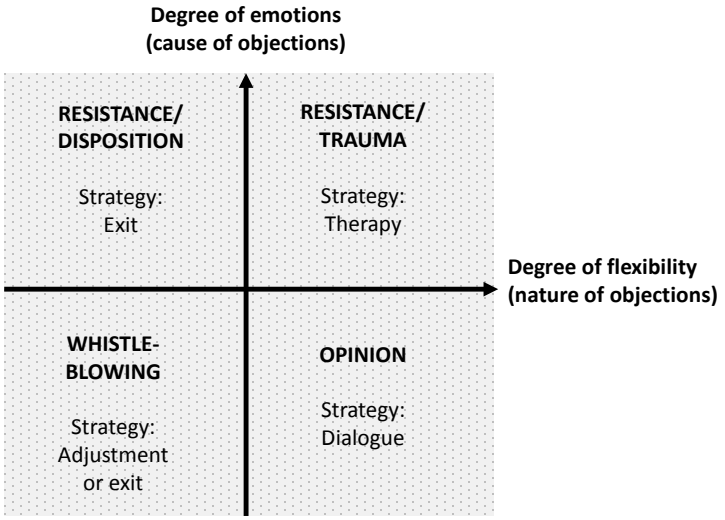


*Figure 2. Four managerial positions (sets of assumptions) pertaining to employee objections.*

Based on the framework in Figure 2, four positions can be identified. Please note that boundaries between positions, in reality, are not as clear-cut as the figure indicates. The four positions have been given the following titles: *whistle-blowing*, *opinion*, *resistance/trauma* and finally, *resistance/disposition*. *Whistle-blowing* and *resistance/disposition* on the one hand, and *opinion* and *resistance/trauma* on the other hand, are distinguished by looking at assumptions concerning the extent to which the opposition is capable of change--here referred to as flexibility. While *whistle-blowing* and *resistance/disposition* are assumed to be relatively inflexible, *opinion* and *resistance/trauma* are considered to be more flexible (capable of change). The two resistance positions at the top of Figure 2 (*resistance/trauma* and *resistance/disposition*) are distinguished from *opinion* and *whistle-blowing,* primarily by the assumption that the first two are caused by a high degree of emotions, whereas the latter two have causes involving considerably less emotions.

As Figure 2 shows, this framework not only helps to identify managerial assumptions pertaining to employee objections, but it can also be used to understand managerial (HRM) strategies for responding to the objections. The main strategy associated with each position is indicated in Figure 2.

For example, when objections are understood as an *opinion*, a strategy focused on *dialogue* would typically follow. When objections are understood as *whistle-blowing*, a strategy focused on either *adjustment or exit* would be justified. In this case, *exit* would be the only option if the manager and the employee cannot agree. Because this position assumes that the employee is unwilling to change his or her opinion, agreement would require that the manager or the management back off in the controversy. By assuming that objections should be understood as *resistance/trauma*, managers can more easily justify ignoring them. The typical strategy with this position would be *therapy*, meaning workshops and other social events aimed at helping the employee to overcome fear, insecurity, and other emotional reactions that may contribute to objections. Finally, when objections are understood as *resistance/disposition*, *exit* would be a common strategy. This means that managers may choose to dismiss these employees, since they are not willing (or able) to change their attitudes, which are primarily based on emotions.

In the following four sections, each position is presented in greater detail.

**Objections as Whistle-blowing**

Whistle-blowing as typically depicted in the literature refers to opposition that is expressed outwardly for public view. As applied here, however, the term *whistle-blowing* refers only to opposition as expressed internally, toward managers. Whistle-blowing means employee objections aiming to correct misconduct or unethical behavior by members of the organization (Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008). Whistle-blowing theory often draws on political science or the ethics literature. There is also the theory on social movements that falls under this category (e.g., Jasper, 1997). Whistle-blowing is based on a conviction that there is some kind of wrongdoing, meaning that there is a moral element to these kind of objections (Miceli et al., 2008).

The ambiguities and political aspects characterizing the divide between resistance and whistle-blowing have been highlighted, for example, by Rothschild and Miethe (1994) and Alford (2001). Rothschild and Miethe (1994) argue that "manager reprisals, intended to quiet the potential whistle-blower, may actually serve to transform and politicize the individual" (p. 252). By interpreting objections by employees as dysfunctional, or even pathological, less ethical and resistant managers can avoid having to deal with the actual content of the employee objections. However, whistle-blowing may also be a way for employees to actively oppose organizational authority (Perrucci, Anderson, Schendel, & Trachtman, 1980; Sewell & Barker, 2006).

Many whistle-blowers are subjected to sanctions, and a reason behind this may be that management may view the

whistle-blower as being too distant from the values of the organization, which includes norms for how to behave in case of wrongdoing (Near, Dworkin, & Miceli, 1993). These values may be difficult to change. It has also been noted that whistle-blowing behavior may be connected to personality (Bjørkelo, Einarsen, & Matthiesen, 2010), which may also be perceived as being difficult to change.

When objections are understood as whistle-blowing, managers must consider them carefully and make an active decision either to oppose the employee's standpoint or support it. If they oppose this standpoint, there is a risk that the employee will leave the organization, especially if the matter is deemed to be of great importance to him or her.

### Objections as Opinion

Objections are increasingly understood as opinion in organization theory in general, and in particular, in the literature on human resource management (HRM). Examples of this perspective include studies by Ford, Ford and D'Amelio (2008), Knowles and Linn (2004), and Piderit (2000). These authors suggest that resistance can be understood as a form of feedback to the change agent. A fundamental assumption of HRM theory is the balance between the employee and the employer's interests, which can be traced back to Cyert and March (1963) and their distinction between personal goals and organizational goals. These assumptions call for a dialogue or some kind of negotiations with the employee, assuming that resistance is an opinion that requires solid attention (and even negotiation).

This position has also been maintained by critical management studies and labor process theory for several decades (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Hardy & Clegg, 1996; Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994; Knights & Willmott, 1990), as well as the theory on workplace democracy (e.g., Foley & Polanyi, 2006; McMahon, 1994). Dent and Goldberg (1999) are highly critical of the traditional interpretations of resistance, where it is seen as a trauma that should be overcome. They call this mental model *monolithic,* and argue that since it tends to disregard the actual content of the objections, it also fails to point out where more research may be required.

When objections are understood as opinions, it will force the managers to instead feel that they need to attend to the issues that cause these objections and enter a dialogue with the employees, seeking their feedback.

### Objections as Resistance/Trauma

In the framework, when employee objections are understood as resistance, it is assumed that these objections rely heavily on emotions. This has been a common assumption in the literature on organizational change. Gil (2003), for example, argues along

this line, and he also provides a list of reasons why there is resistance, all of which focus on problems with the employee. The framework includes two positions where employee objections are referred to as resistance: resistance/trauma and resistance/disposition. First, let us examine the position *resistance/trauma*.

In the literature, resistance is often assumed to be a psychological trauma that can (and should) be "overcome" (e.g., Coch & French, 2009; Kusstatscher & Cooper, 2005), meaning a flexible attitude, capable of change. Craine is an example of a scholar adopting this interpretation of resistance, stating:

Perhaps creative thinker and author Roger Von Oech said it best: 'There are two basic rules of life: Change is inevitable, and everybody resists change.' Resisting change is as congenital as being frightened of the dark, having a crush at age 16, or laughing at the Three Stooges. Little can be done to avoid these reactions. They are natural, emotional, and inevitable. This innate resistance to change occurs because most people like things to be comfortable and familiar. […] Thus, by understanding the 'grieving' process people use to deal with change, it may be possible to reduce some of the potentially damaging consequences. (Craine, 2007, p. 44)

Craine (2007) suggests a four-step cycle of emotions, maintaining that this is natural for individuals to pass through when faced with change. He also outlines a therapeutic change program to help employees overcome this, (as he considers it) a more or less inevitable stage of resistance. Fulmer and Gilkey (1988) provide another example of scholars having this interpretation of resistance, comparing resistance to the immature behavior of "a teenager in a blended family" (p. 276).

Social psychology has been highly influential in the stream of research, where stereotypes have been considered to be an important factor. Stereotypes are simplified images of groups of individuals (Brown & Gaertner, 2001). For many years, stereotypes and categorization have been regarded as pathological in social psychology (Brown & Gaertner, 2001, p. 16f). Today, it is increasingly recognized (e.g., Brown and Gaertner, 2001) that conflict between groups does not have to be a problem—rather, it can be a natural and healthy process, in which individuals learn to relate to a certain social context. However, it is still considered a temporary state, similar to a trauma that should be overcome.

There is also a related body of literature focusing on individual *readiness for change*, where the trauma assumingly has been avoided or diminished by early measures (e.g., Choi & Ruona, 2011). For instance, Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder (1993), Herscovitch and Meyer (2002), and Wanberg and Banas (2000) talk about a psychological state in which organizational members are positively disposed to implementing organizational change; however, they used different terms. Armenakis et al. (1993) talk about "readiness for change" (p. 684; see also Self &

Schraeder, 2009). Using the term *openness to change*, Wanberg and Banas (2000) suggest that this is an attitude that involves the individual's (a) willingness to support the change, and (b) positive feelings about the potential consequences of the change (p. 132). Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) talk about the employee's "commitment to change" (p. 475). According to Armenakis and Fredenberger (1997), resistance is natural in change attempts, since change creates uncertainty.

When objections are understood as resistance/trauma, a typical management strategy would be to arrange workshops, seminars, and other types of support as a way to try to help employees overcome the "blocking" of their emotions. This may also include fabricated opportunities to influence managerial decisions, where employee input is never actually given much consideration.

**Objections as Resistance/Disposition**

The natural sciences (in particular, biology with its interest in genetic predispositions, but also personality psychology), have been highly influential in the interpretation of objections as *resistance/disposition*. For many decades there has been a widespread interest in personality traits and personality tests in society as well as in the literature. For example, Covin et al. (1996), discussing the integration process following from a merger from an intuitive perspective, see it as natural that particular personal characteristics will predispose individuals to certain attitudes during change efforts.

This dispositional perspective is also adopted by Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, and Welbourne (1999), in a study where they explore the impact of seven personality traits on the individual's ability to cope with change. The study showed a correlation with positive self-concept and risk tolerance, but it also showed that a number of extrinsic factors influenced one's coping capacity. The interpretation of objections as resistance/disposition goes back to Freud and his analysis of how early experiences in life influence later personality characteristics (Gendlin, 1964). This perspective appears today in writings on some professionals, such as physicians who occasionally are described as being difficult to govern (cf, Bringselius, 2013).

When objections are understood as *resistance/disposition*, a common management strategy would be to let go of the resistant employees because it is assumed that they are unable to change their attitudes. The alternative would be to let them remain, but to accept that they hold another opinion than the management.

**Discussion**

The conceptual framework suggested in this article shows how managerial attitudes toward employee objections may differ and how these attitudes may also affect managerial strategies. It also

shows how the four positions in the framework are supported by different streams of research, making the distinction potentially useful to both practitioners and scholars.. By paying further attention to both theoretical and empirical assumptions in this regard, it may be possible to enhance our understanding of the relation between the management and the employee in the context of organizational change.

One of the aspects that is lacking in the model is a theory to link the assumptions and strategies. There can be many different types of mechanisms in this regard. As an example, the link can be understood in terms of (oblivious) self-rationalization and (intentional) rhetoric. Self-rationalization is the (primarily *unconscious*) process of presenting seemingly rational arguments to *oneself* in order to justify a certain action. Rhetoric is the (primarily conscious) process of presenting seemingly rational arguments to *others*, in order to justify a certain action. Self-rationalization can be compared to self-deception (Audi, 1988; Funkhouser, 2005), although this concept has a stronger normative flavor. Rhetoric is a common trait in the management of most organizations (Flory & Iglesias, 2010; Heath, 2011).

When managers form their assumptions about employee objections, taking one of the positions in the framework suggested in this paper, they choose a certain management strategy at the same time. This means that their process of forming assumptions may very well be influenced by their personal agendas and preferences. When this process is unconscious and focused on the self, it represents a mechanism of self-rationalization. When it is conscious and focused on others, it represents a mechanism of rhetoric. Often, however, it is not known whether agendas are deliberate or not. These mechanisms indicate how both organizational politics and psychological factors may influence managerial assumptions about employee objections.

In particular, the two mechanisms and the framework highlight how it is far from neutral when employee objections are referred to as *resistance*. Over the past few decades, as resistance has become recognized as being natural and useful, research promoting employee involvement in decision making (e.g., Grimsson, 2012; Snape & Redman, 2010) has also flourished. This literature emphasizes the value of a good relationship between management and employees, and employee participation has been encouraged in the change management literature ever since Elton Mayo introduced human relations. However, more recently, Mayo has been criticized for confusing therapy with democracy (Hoopes, 2003). Hoopes (2003) argues that modern management, as typically influenced by Mayo, rarely intends to allow employees any real influence. Instead, they hope that simply offering the opportunity for employees to present their opinions, objections, and ideas, this will serve as a form of therapy, making them feel more comfortable and helping them overcome resistance. This would be a common strategy when

managers assume that objections should be understood as *resistance/trauma*. The assumption then becomes that employees only need time and support to overcome their fears and anxieties. This tendency in the organizational change practice has also been noted in a study by Bonet and Sauquet (2010), where they maintain that these participatory models may only be used as *rhetoric*, whereas the actual influence of employees is limited.

## Conclusions

For decades, scholars have sought to explain why employees object to organizational change. Attention has traditionally been directed primarily toward the employees, describing resistance as a problematic and emotional reaction (e.g., Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008; Craine, 2007; Fiorelli & Margolis, 1993; Fulmer & Gilkey, 1988; Goldstein, 1989; Kelley & Volkart, 1952; Kiefer, 2002; Kusstatscher & Cooper, 2005; Lawrence, 1969; Lewin, 1945, 1947; Marrow, 1957; Zander, 1950).

In more recent studies, this approach to employee objections has been challenged. Merron (1993), for example, holds that merely by labeling individuals as being resistant, it hinders a deeper, more effective perspective on organizational change. Since Merron's contribution in 1993, numerous other scholars have called for a reassessment of employee objections and a more critical approach to the concept of resistance to change (e.g., Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008; Ford & Ford, 2009; King & Anderson, 1995; Knowles & Linn, 2004; Symon, 2005; Waddell & Sohal, 1998). In particular, it is pointed out that resistance may actually be legitimate.

The position of this paper is that it may be meaningful not only to look at the objecting employees, but also to look at managers and their assumptions pertaining to these objections. Four managerial positions have been suggested, based on a framework with two dimensions. The four positions are: *whistle-blowing*, *opinion*, *resistance/trauma*, and *resistance/disposition*. Each of these positions is associated with a certain managerial strategy. By looking at these strategies, it may be easier to understand how assumptions are formed, for example, as self-rationalizations and rhetoric.

Finally, the framework developed in this article can be used to understand how managers relate to employees, but it may also be used to analyze assumptions about employee objections in existing literature. A preliminary review presented here suggests that these assumptions differ somewhat between social psychology, personality psychology, whistle-blowing theory, labor process theory, critical management studies, and the more general body of change management theory. The assumptions that dominate these various fields may also affect study designs and study results.

In future research, this conceptual framework can be elaborated further, for example, to understand how managerial

attitudes toward employee objections may alter over the course of a longitudinal change process and what mechanisms trigger shifts in attitudes.

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