Resistance is Futile: When and Why do People Comply?

Introduction

When implementing ITIL, or any of its constituent processes, it is reasonable to predict a level of resistance to the change(s) – both from the business and from internal IT team members. Therefore, an understanding of why people resist and, when people conform and comply can be helpful in dealing with resistance.

This paper briefly outlines and summarises psychological research carried out regarding resistance, conformity and compliance. It is also intended to aid personal awareness. Full references are provided to assist the reader in pursuing further reading.

Why do People Resist?

James O'Toole provides 33 hypotheses for why people resist change:

1. Homeostasis – change is not a natural condition.
2. Stare decisis – presumption given to the status quo; burden of proof is on change.
3. Inertia – takes considerable power to change course.
4. Satisfaction – most people like the way things are.
5. Lack of ripeness – the preconditions for change haven't been met; the time isn't right.
6. Fear – people fear the unknown.
7. Self-interest – the change may be good for others but not us.
8. Lack of self-confidence – we don’t think we are up to the new challenges.
9. Future shock – overwhelmed by change, we hunker down and resist it.
10. Futility – we view all change as superficial, cosmetic, and illusory, so why bother?
11. Lack of knowledge – we don’t know how to change or what to change to.
12. Human nature – humans are competitive, aggressive, greedy, and selfish and lack the altruism necessary to change.
13. Cynicism – we suspect the motives of the change agent.
14. Perversity – change sounds good but we fear that the unintended consequences will be bad.
15. Individual genius versus group mediocrity – those of us with mediocre minds can’t see the wisdom of the change.
16. Ego – the powerful refuse to admit that they have been wrong.
17. Short-term thinking – people can’t defer gratification.
18. Myopia – we can’t see that the change is in the broader self-interest.
19. Sleepwalking – most of us lead unexamined lives.
20. Snow blindness – groupthink, or social conformity.
21. Collective fantasy – we don’t learn from experience and view everything in the light of preconceived notions.
22. Chauvinistic conditioning – we are right; they who want us to change are wrong.
23. Fallacy of the exception – the change might work elsewhere but we are different.
24. Ideology – we have different worldviews; inherently conflicting values.
25. Institutionalism – individuals may change but groups do not.
26. “Natura no facit saltum” – “nature does not proceed by leaps”.
27. The rectitude of the powerful – who are we to question the leaders who set us on the current course?
28. “Change has no constituency” – the minority has a greater stake in preserving the status quo than the majority has in changing.
29. Determinism – there is nothing any one can do to bring about purposeful change.
30. Scientism – the lessons of history are scientific and therefore there is nothing to learn from them.
31. Habit.
32. The despotism of custom – the ideas of change agents are seen as a reproach to society.
33. Human mindlessness.

**When do people Conform?**

People usually conform when there is a majority who do conform.

Solomon Asch² examined how people would respond when they were faced with a norm that already existed but that was obviously wrong. An experiment was designed whereby all but one of a group were confederates of the experimenter. There were two conditions. In the control condition, the subject had to respond before any of the other participants. In the experimental condition the subject did not respond until after the confederates did. The confederates chose the obviously correct response on six trials, but
on the other twelve trials they all gave the same, obviously incorrect response. Thus on twelve trials, each subject was confronted with a “social reality” created by the group norm that conflicted with the physical reality created by what the person could clearly see. Only 5% of the subjects in the control condition ever made a mistake on this easy perceptual task. However, among subjects who heard the confederates’ responses before giving their own, about 70% made at least one error by conforming to the group norm.

Why did the people in Asch’s experiment give so many incorrect responses when they were capable of near perfect performance? One possible reason is ‘public conformity’. They didn’t really change their minds, instead, perhaps they gave an answer they did not believe simply because it was the socially desirable thing to do. Another possibility is called ‘private acceptance’; where the subjects used the confederates’ responses as legitimate evidence about reality, were convinced that their own perceptions were wrong and so changed their minds.

Morton Deutsch and Harold Gerard reasoned that if conformity disappeared when people gave their responses in private with complete anonymity, then Asch’s findings must reflect public conformity, not private acceptance. In fact, conformity does decrease when people can respond anonymously instead of publicly, but it is not eliminated. People sometimes publicly produce responses that they do not believe, but hearing other people’s responses also influences their private beliefs (Moscovici, 1985).

**Ambiguity of the Situation & Conformity**

Ambiguity is very important in determining how much conformity will occur. When Asch varied his experiment so that it became more difficult to be sure of the correct answer, conformity to incorrect group norms rose markedly. As the physical reality of the situation becomes less clear, people rely more and more on other’s opinions (Shaw, Rothschild & Strickland, 1957), and conformity to a group norm becomes more likely.
Unanimity and Size of the Majority

If ambiguity contributes so much to conformity, why did so many of Asch’s subjects conform to a judgement that was unambiguously wrong? The answer has to do with the unanimity of the group’s judgement and the number of people expressing it. Specifically, people experience great pressure to conform as long as the majority is unanimous. If even one other person in the group disagrees with the majority view, conformity drops greatly. For example, when Asch arranged for just one confederate to disagree with the others, the incidence of conformity was reduced to less than 10%. Once unanimity is broken, it becomes much easier to disagree with the majority, even if the other nonconformist does not agree with the person’s own view (Nemeth & Chiles, 1998).

Personal Characteristics

Generally, people with high status in a group are less likely to conform than those with relatively low status (Buss et al., 1987). Attraction to a group also influences conformity. People are more likely to conform when they like members of a group than when there is little or no attraction (Forsyth, 1983). Attraction may increase conformity because people tend to trust the judgement of those they like or because they want the approval of people to whom they are attracted. Conformity based on the desire for approval from attractive group members appears to be particularly likely among those with low self-esteem (Stang, 1972). Another personal characteristic that may shape conformity is the degree to which people are concerned with being liked or with being correct. People who are preoccupied with being liked are likely to conform, particularly when they are also attracted to the others in the group. In contrast, people who are preoccupied with being right are less likely to conform, no matter how much or how little they are attracted to others in the group (Insko et al., 1985).
Inducing Compliance

Compliance involves changing what you say or do because of a direct request from someone who has no authority over you.

How is compliance brought about? Many people believe that the direct approach is always best – if you want something, ask for it. However, salespeople, political strategists, social psychologists, and other experts on the subject have learned that often the best way to get something is to ask for something else. This strategy usually takes one of three forms:-

- the foot-in-the-door technique
- the door-in-the-face procedure
- the low-ball approach

The foot-in-the-door technique consists of beginning with small requests and working up to larger ones. Its name comes from an experiment in which homeowners in California were approached in one of two ways. In some cases, the experimenter claimed to represent a group concerned with reducing traffic accidents in the community and asked the homeowners if a large and unattractive “Drive Carefully” sign could be placed on their front lawn. Approximately 17% of the people approached complied with this request. In the foot-in-the-door condition, homeowners were first asked only to sign a petition urging their legislators to work toward decreasing the number of accidents in the community. Several weeks later, a different experimenter asked these same people to place the “Drive Carefully” sign on their lawn. In this case, 55% of people complied (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Why is this so? Firstly, people are usually more likely to comply with a request whose cost in time, money, effort, or inconvenience is low rather than high. Secondly, complying with a small request makes people think of themselves as supporting and being committed to the source of the request. This occurs through the self-perception and cognitive dissonance process (for example, “if I signed the petition, I must care enough about traffic safety to do something about it”). When faced with the higher cost request (displaying the “Drive Carefully” sign), the subjects were likely to recall their previous action.
and to perceive their strong commitment to the safety issue. The likelihood of complying with the request was thus increased because doing so was consistent with these people’s self-perceptions and past actions (Schwarzwald, Bizman & Raz, 1983[12]).

The opposite approach – the door-in-the-face procedure – can also be effective in obtaining compliance (Cann, Sherman & Elkes, 1975[13]). This strategy begins with a very large request that is likely to be denied. Then the person making the original request concedes that it was rather extreme and substitutes a lesser alternative, which is what the requester wanted in the first place. Because the new request now seems so modest in contrast with the first one, it is more likely to be granted (for example, one would ask for an £8,000.00 per year pay rise but would expect to be beaten down to between £2-£5K p.a. – which was realistically expected in the first place. Alternatively, “We are investigating outsourcing the whole of the IT Department”. A little later; “we hear what you say; and have decided to review the Support Services functions first by carrying out market testing”).

The low-ball approach (getting X by asking for Y) (Cialdini et al., 1978[14]) is the third approach. The first step is to obtain a verbal commitment from someone to do something. The second step is to show that only a higher cost version of the initial request will do any good. Finally, that higher-cost request is made. The low-ball approach differs from the foot-in-the-door technique because the initial request is escalated after it is agreed to but before it can be fulfilled.

Summary

1. It is human nature to resist change; resistance is a perfectly normal response/defence mechanism and, is therefore to be expected. People resist for a variety of conscious and subconscious reasons, some individualistic (instinct, what’s in it for me?, fear, lack of confidence, knowledge), cultural, institutional, group-think (the majority view, to be liked/accepted by the group – not to appear ‘different’ or ‘outside’), previous experience, future shock etc.

2. The majority of people – the exceptions usually being high status, confident individuals – will bow to a majority view even if the view is
clearly incorrect and, particularly in ambiguous circumstances (e.g., poor communications, lack of knowledge). Consequently, to qualitatively improve and increase communications (or educational opportunities) will remove much of the ambiguity and, therefore, encourage individual confidence in terms of disagreeing with the norm cynical/negative opinion of the majority.

3. Inducing compliance can be attained by:
   a. Breaking the unanimity of resistance – even by one (see point 2 above).
   b. Reading and following `Choking on ITIL? A Menu for Success’ ([http://www.itilhelp.com](http://www.itilhelp.com) [downloads]).
   c. Designing circumstances that require only minimal initial commitment and change building up to a larger degree of commitment and change. [start small, get bigger] or,
   d. Requiring much larger changes and allowing the changes to be negotiated down (to a level actually expected). [start big, get smaller] or
   e. Negotiating a reasonable change but then persuading that this will not actually suffice (before the change is implemented); thereby increasing the scope of the change with consensus. [start by asking for X and getting it then, justify and move to position Y (with consensus)] or
   f. Any variation of the above dependent on the nature of the Team/Department/individual.

References:


