What is the Psychology Behind Resistance to Change?

**Key Concept**

Successful change does not only depend on how change agents manage the change, but also on employee attitudes toward change, which are shaped by psychological antecedents. Specifically, well-informed employees who have high social support will have a more positive attitude about organizational change efforts.

**Idea Summary**

Why are some people more open to change and others instinctively resistant to anything that significantly alters the status quo? The key is often in an individual's basic attitude toward change. Some people will default to an unfavourable, negative attitude toward change that leads to resistance, while others have within them a favourable positive attitude toward change that leads to openness.

Cognitive biases — biases in how people take in, interpret and remember information — can have a major effect on their attitudes toward change. For example, we tend to put all information into preset categories; thus, if new information is categorized in a certain way, then anything related to that information is automatically lumped into the same category.

Schematic processing — basically the easy road to remembering information by focusing less on detailed information and more on assumptions and previous conclusions — is another cognitive shortcut that impacts attitudes on change. Schematic processing is why, for example, we resort to stereotypes when processing information.

The bottom line of these cognitive biases is that people don't take all of the information available into consideration when developing their attitudes about that information; instead they rely on previous information and evaluations. Thus, a person who has seen a change initiative fail is going to remember that failure, and evaluate new change initiatives in the context of that failure. The antidote to such cognitive
biases is information: the more information people have about new change initiatives, the less likely they are going to use psychological antecedents to fill in the blanks.

There’s also a social component to attitudes. Social support in the workplace — ranging from empathy and tangible assistance from colleagues and managers to structures that make people available to help — help reduce stress and improve job satisfaction. The emotional benefit of social support builds a more positive attitude toward change.

Social support can even help combat cognitive biases, since employees gather much of their information from social interactions.

**Business Application**

There are many methodologies and guidelines for implementing organizational change, including steps to overcome the natural and sometimes stubborn resistance that all change agents will meet. Recognizing that resistance to change is an attitude, and understanding the psychological roots of that attitude, can help to overcome this resistance.

Knowing how employees process information is a first step. Companies must override the cognitive biases that might lead to a negative attitude by providing as much detailed information about the change as possible. Don't let employees come to their own conclusions about what is happening and why, since those conclusions will be coloured by their biases.

Understanding the role of emotions from social support is also important. Create a foundation and culture of full support for employees — e.g. encourage collaborative efforts, knowledge sharing and the expression of empathy in your organizations. Emotion is stronger than cognition in developing certain attitudes. Secure and well-supported employees are less likely to resist your change initiatives.

**Further Reading**


**Further Relevant Resources**

Jose Luis C. Iglesias' profile on LinkedIn
Jose Luis C. Iglesias' author profile at SSRN
NYU Stern School of Business Executive Education profile at IEDP