



The Human Side of Change

Make Change Inevitable and Resistance Futile

With the advent of every new management tool comes a painfully predictable wave of human resistance. The reasons people resist new technologies, methods, and systems are as varied as the number of humans you've asked to change. For instance, some employees vehemently resist Six Sigma efforts because they themselves didn't invent the program. Others view any changes in their sacred quality processes as a scary maneuver and fight it on principle; "Don't rock the boat" is their ongoing motto. And let's not forget Eve Roger's adoption curve. Some people don't cozy up to JIT or SPC because they're late adopters or even laggards. Their natural response to innovation is to wait for others to embrace the change before they themselves accept anything new. These are the folks who are just now buying their first microwave ovens.

Of course, when resisters, scared folks, and late adopters don't embrace new programs, the resultant lack of shared vision and inconsistent implementation first confuses and eventually kills any change effort.

Resistance Is Predictable

But there is good news in all of this. As wide-ranging as the reasons are for resisting change, the various forms of resistance do share one element in common: The people who are fighting the change are rational. They've thought about the change effort, measured the costs against the benefits, and have come to believe that the new methods will make matters worse for them, not better. The analysis may be faulty, the facts fractured, and the reasons flawed, but the unseen force behind all resistance is the same. People look into the crystal ball of change and see bad things happening to them.

"Sure the new quality system will help the company," one employee argues, "but it's going to make my job harder, and who wants that?" A colleague chimes in with, "I'm afraid it'll end up doing a bunch of stuff I didn't sign up for and I'm going to fight it." "You want me to get all excited about the changes?" another employee asks. "These changes are going to be the death of my career!"

But sometimes you're on the other side of the argument. You welcome change. For instance, once you've heard the glorious benefits of, say, a Six-Sigma program, resistance seems silly. You look forward to the change. You can't wait for the change. In fact, you can't figure out why others aren't as excited as you are. "What's wrong with those cretins?" you secretly wonder.

Consider the following common Six Sigma example. A senior manager once complained to us, “The program couldn’t have made more sense. It couldn’t have received more support. And we couldn’t have partnered with a more seasoned consulting team. And yet the only parts of the company where people really adopted the tools were places where we used brute force to get them to comply. But these were costly victories and the executive committee can’t sustain this whole thing by sheer will—there aren’t enough of us to go around.”

What’s the Big Deal?

People’s resistance to new ideas can be inconvenient—it can even be a real pain—but what’s the big deal? Is the fact that well-designed management initiatives are often resisted by the masses merely a blip on the innovation radar, or has the impact been substantially negative? Is it something you ought to worry about?

The cold, hard truth is that the cost of our inability to get people to understand and embrace new methods has been absolutely horrendous. Every management initiative that has come down the pike the past two to three decades was heralded by corporations across the world. Each was accompanied by massive levels of hope, money, and leadership attention. Each was based on genuine science, made a whole lot of sense, and had a great deal to offer to the corporate world. And yet, all but one of these management initiatives is now passé, having left 75 percent or more of their once-zealous adherents with little to show but failure.¹

In addition to losing out on the possible improvements, repeated failure to bring about lasting change eventually creates a culture of suspicion and resistance. New change programs born under the shadow of past failures are practically doomed. As we at VitalSmarts have partnered with senior leaders in over fifty large-scale change efforts, what we have typically found as we walk through the front gates is near-fatal levels of cynicism.

When you talk to employees about the exciting new change effort you’re trying to facilitate, people aren’t easily excited. In fact, long-timers are quick to tick off the list of catchy names of failed programs—speaking each acronym with an increasing sense of disgust. To punctuate their points, they even drag out a collection of related mugs and T-shirts extensive enough to host and clothe a small town. They use this overwhelming evidence to confirm their prediction that their wild-eyed leaders’ new scheme will likewise fail.

Not only do repeated failures fuel cynicism, but they also send out a loud and clear warning: “Don’t associate with these career killers!” More than one person has seen the wisdom of a new initiative, studied it, caught the excitement, changed job assignments in order to lead out with the initiative, and then been laid off when the program is killed as part of a cost-cutting movement. It doesn’t take rocket science to realize that cozying up with the latest “flavor of the month” is like becoming a target for downsizing.

Not wanting to be the next target, savvy folks learn to quickly distance themselves from each new management acronym that is enthusiastically trotted out. They hear the fevered beat of the PR drum as the new program is vigorously marched through the hallways, but secretly imagine the haunting sound of taps that one day will accompany the program as it’s bugled to its inevitable grave. And they don’t want to die with it.

In companies where a series of initiatives have routinely failed, seasoned folks not only resist change, but also protect themselves from the psychological trauma of repeated failure with the armor of cynicism. They also protect their jobs by smiling politely when requested to try out the new methods. They smile for the cameras and then do their level best to do the least amount humanly possible to support the change. “Let someone else bet their careers on an acronym,” they decide.

The tragedy here is that these failed management tools had the potential to be much more. There was nothing wrong with most of these systems in principle. Each made terrific sense. Who could argue with the need to make evidence-driven decisions, look for systemic root causes, consider up- and downstream implications of individual tasks, focus on external stakeholders, and so on?

Unfortunately, change efforts will continue their long-standing tradition of resistance and failure—unless two things change.

What Does It Take to Succeed?

As you scan the horizon of failed change efforts, occasionally you come across an organization that implemented a massive change effort and was widely successful. What makes the difference? Is it dumb luck or can we learn from the best?

In an attempt to get to the root of the widespread resistance to Six Sigma, we interviewed black belts and teams that had made no progress in spite of massive investments in training and support. Next we interviewed the teams that had adopted and aggressively implemented Six Sigma principles.² The differences could not have been starker. And the message could not have been more surprising.

The most startling finding was that all those we interviewed were identically convinced that Six Sigma was the right thing to do. No one had a beef with the *content* of Six Sigma. You couldn’t differentiate laggards from leaders by how logically persuaded they were about the merit and even the urgency of Six Sigma measures. In a similar vein, both groups told stories about how they feared that the change efforts would meet a great deal of resistance. Both groups imagined all kinds of problems with the proposed changes. Both groups worried about failure. Both could put their finger on the exact barriers they would face.

And now for the difference. Groups that were successful were able to do two things that others couldn’t: they used two different skill sets—and of all things, they were social skills.

Crucial Conversations®

Successful groups were able to speak openly about anticipated problems. They were masters of what we have come to call *crucial conversations*. When new programs were introduced, they were able to successfully talk about possible concerns, issues, and barriers—and by so doing *create* the social support they needed to succeed.

Now, here’s why the ability to hold a crucial conversation is a key to success. As you begin to bring in new programs and systems, people have to be able to honestly raise issues and concerns. Their ideas have to be heard so that the appropriate steps can be taken to tailor

the changes to specific cultural dimensions and unique needs. And *everybody*—no matter their background, education, or expertise—needs to be able to speak and be heard.

When all the ideas from an entire team are surfaced, two things happen. First, the team experiences synergy as people build off each other's input—surfacing the best ideas helps teams make the best decisions. Second, people then act on those decision with unity and commitment—because they've been involved from the beginning. In short, when stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong, change efforts work best when people know how to hold crucial conversations.

Crucial Confrontations™

Once people have talked about issues and concerns and eventually established plans, it's time to implement them. But what if people don't follow the new processes or if they violate new rules or simply behave in ways that are incongruent with the philosophy behind a change effort? Then what?

In top companies, people know how to discuss broken promises, violated expectations, or just plain bad behavior. That is, people are skilled enough to speak in the moment and face to face about problems. They're masters of what we have come to call *crucial confrontations*.

Let's be clear about our language here. In a crucial *conversation*, people work through their differences of opinion. It's about disagreement. In a crucial *confrontation*, people deal with broken promises. It's about disappointment.

Now, back to the point. As new policies, procedures, and processes are put into place as part of an ongoing change effort, they'll never find a footing if employees are allowed to break them with impunity. In order for Six Sigma or any other change program to succeed, people must know how to confront one another in an effective, direct, and healthy way. In short, they must be masters of crucial confrontations.

The key learning here was that what it takes for new and countercultural practices to take root is not a welcoming social climate. Any significant social change involves a redistribution of power and requires refocusing of resources and attention on priorities that aren't in some leaders' top drawers. Sometimes people take a look at what's being asked of them and conclude that bad things are about to happen, so they resist.

Consequently, a change effort is less likely to fail based on the technical merits of the project than on whether or not opinion leaders are capable of dealing effectively with the inevitable resistance they will encounter in the course of orchestrating change. More specifically, can opinion leaders (and eventually everyone involved) routinely employ two important social skills? First, can they talk about differences of opinion and work them through to everyone's satisfaction (crucial conversations)? Second, once new expectations and standards have been set, can people deal with colleagues who don't live up to their promises (crucial confrontations)? These are the two skill sets you must have in place if you expect to make change inevitable and resistance futile.

Let's see how the two crucial skill sets work hand in hand. To do so, we'll apply them to a Six Sigma effort.

If You're Stuck, Learn What's Keeping You There

Karla came back from her first Lean/Six Sigma training excited. She didn't learn anything particularly new. Rather, she was hopeful that this would finally give her a platform to do things she had known for years needed doing. In a debrief meeting with her team she reported that she had committed to participate in an integrated "Kanban" JIT system with other related groups. Her boss nodded suspiciously as she described it, but she figured the results would speak for themselves as they reduced inventories and dropped error rates across the department.

Two weeks later she threw her hands in the air and gave up. One of her team's suggestions would have required her boss to move his cubicle a little farther from the aisle. Her boss turned it down and asked her to come up with another way. There wasn't another way. She had already explained that. She concluded that the inviolable principle in her team was the boss's convenience, not the "value stream." She stopped attending Kanban meetings, and the effort soon withered.

Karla's story echoes that of everyone we interviewed who expressed cynicism about Six Sigma. All told of experiences from which they had drawn negative conclusions. Interestingly, those who succeeded also had dispiriting experiences somewhere along the way. The difference was in what they did—and how others responded—when the disappointment happened.

Here's the lesson we learned by comparing top performers with everyone else: Whenever you draw a conclusion about another person or team, you have two choices: 1) you can talk it out, or 2) you can act it out. In other words, you can either talk about the problem and attempt to resolve it, or you can conclude that the issue is undiscussable, and act out the conclusion you've drawn. The result is completely predictable.

If, for example, you conclude that your boss is self-serving and disingenuous about his or her support for your improvement efforts, you have these two choices. Talking it out calls for a crucial confrontation. He or she isn't living up to a promise. If you successfully talk it out, there is a chance you will change your conclusion, change the other person's behavior, or a combination of the two. If you choose not to attempt to talk it out, you *will* act it out. Your behavior and attitude will be influenced by this conclusion from this point forward. And that's what happened to Karla.

Our research into resistant and receptive teams in Six Sigma shows that there are five concerns people must be able to resolve if they hope to adopt and sustain these valuable practices. These concerns are:

1. Upper management isn't really committed.
2. Some of my improvement ideas could be very threatening to people here.
3. My boss will never support this.
4. My peers aren't held accountable for supporting the effort.
5. Other departments won't cooperate.

Now, we aren't suggesting that these concerns are incorrect. Typically, people have valid reasons to suspect these conclusions are true (e.g., "I don't trust senior management because they whacked everyone who supported TQM"). The problem is that people don't merely assume these conclusions are correct, they assume they're *permanent*.

Crucial Confrontation Skills

In successful departments, when people encountered one of these five issues, they found ways to raise their concerns. More often than not, if they held a crucial confrontation in a way that didn't provoke defensiveness, they could influence the attitude or behavior of the troublesome party. Almost as often, they also found that reality wasn't quite as bad as their conclusion. They'd discover, for example, that upper management didn't understand the implications of their actions. Or their boss was not simply uncommitted, he or she was overwhelmed. What was important about these crucial confrontations was that they often produced change both in the other person's behavior and in the initiator's perception.

Crucial Conversation Skills

Now, let's look at what happens when opinions vary. We worked with one organization in their efforts to get off dead center with Six Sigma. In one telling exchange, members of an ambivalent team contacted their CEO personally and asked for a meeting. They didn't agree with what the CEO had been saying. During this crucial conversation they tentatively expressed their reservations about the life-expectancy of Six Sigma adherents. While the CEO couldn't promise job security, and couldn't promise that he'd be around forever, the very fact that these people discovered that they could raise their concerns with senior management increased their belief that he was trustworthy. While reality and risks didn't change, their perceptions of those in charge did, and they got on board.

In the poor-performing teams, a self-fulfilling prophecy replaced a crucial conversation. Since people concluded Six Sigma was a sham, they said nothing and then withdrew their support. As they did so, the effort stalled, which confirmed their original assumption that it was a waste of time. Similarly, those who believed it would never work because no one ever held their deadbeat peers accountable were so confident of their conclusion that they didn't bother expressing it. The result? Their colleagues still weren't being held accountable, and the cynics used this as additional evidence that they were right all along.

To break from this unhealthy cycle, people must find a way to surface, test, and change their conclusion—or they will act it out with predictable consequences. And the only way to test and change these kinds of conclusions is by stepping up to crucial conversations.

In light of these findings, the CEO from the previous example and his senior team determined to make a serious effort to influence how people approached the five areas of concern that most consistently produced cynicism and withdrawal. Through a serious effort to change these vital elements of their culture, they unlocked spontaneous and rapid support in Six Sigma implementation.

Fulfilling the Promise of Six Sigma

After the initial crucial conversation with his direct reports, the CEO and his leadership team worked aggressively over the next nine months to influence how people approached both crucial conversations and crucial confrontations—across their organization. The results were rapid and measurable.

Using a survey, we tested whether the two crucial skill sets were actually improving. We also tracked departmental improvements in quality, productivity, and cycle time. A study conducted by independent researchers found that every 1 percent improvement in survey measures of the targeted skills corresponded with productivity savings of over \$1,500,000. Similar correlations with quality and cycle time were demonstrated as well.

The results were significant—our first survey showed an improvement of 13 percent. Relationships between previously conflicting teams, between frontline workers and their supervisors, and between work teams and senior management improved markedly. Many commented that Six Sigma had become “real.” As further evidence of the relationship between crucial conversations and performance improvement, *there were no cases of significant improvement in performance where there were not also corresponding improvements in survey measures of crucial conversations.*

Yeah, But Is It Sustainable?

Now we come to the final question. We have strong evidence that the consistent application of a handful of crucial skills is the key to the success of any new and promising practices (from adopting Six Sigma to shifting to a team approach). We also have studies that show it's possible to make rapid and significant progress when people employ these skills—even in highly resistant organizations. But the final question is the kicker. How can you ensure that crucial skills don't just become the next “flavor of the month”?

To be truthful, we've seen two kinds of postscripts. We've seen organizations where leaders take their eye off the ball. They stop paying attention to how they and others apply their crucial skills, and, predictably, their change efforts flounder and eventually fail. Well-documented policies are insufficient to stimulate change. We've seen even more cases where leaders become so strong in their skills and so committed to using them that it has profoundly affected the way they lead throughout their careers. In these cases, there may be both progress and backsliding, but when they continue to pay attention to how they handle both crucial conversations and crucial confrontations, they enjoy significant and lasting change. 🍌

Endnotes

¹ In “Beyond the Fads: How Leaders Drive Change with Results” (*Human Resource Planning* 17, no. 2 [1994]:25–44), Ron Ashkenas suggests the failure rate is 75 percent or more. Other studies suggest much higher. Our survey of relevant studies puts it in the 85 percent range.

² VitalSmarts principals have conducted over 100 systematic “culture assessments” over the past twenty-five years. These assessments helped identify barriers to change in Six Sigma, Lean, and other major change initiatives. The conclusions in this article draw from both the broader set of assessments and from research into Six Sigma and related initiatives.

About VitalSmarts

An innovator in best-practice training and consulting research, VitalSmarts delivers significant improvements to the results companies care about most.

For more than twenty-five years, the company principals have researched methods for bringing about systematic and lasting change. Based on this ongoing research, VitalSmarts has helped thousands of organizations, including more than three hundred of the Fortune 500, realize quick, hard-hitting results through its award-winning training programs in a way that no other training company yet offers.

VitalSmarts currently has two training initiatives: Crucial Conversations® and Crucial Confrontations™. The Company has two New York Times bestselling books of the same titles based on this research: Crucial Conversations and Crucial Confrontations.

VitalSmarts also offers keynote speaking, on-site consulting, customized development, and executive mastery retreats.

VitalSmarts™

www.vital-smarts.com 800.449.5989

© 2005 VitalSmarts. All Rights Reserved. VitalSmarts, the Vital head, Crucial, Crucial Skills, Style Under Stress, and Crucial Confrontations are trademarks and Crucial Conversations is a registered trademark of VitalSmarts, L.C.