

The human brain is wired for comfort and certainty. It likes routines, patterns and habits. Change challenges us – like that being experienced by rural businesses across Australia after natural disasters, COVID-19, skills shortages and technology advances, writes Leah Mether*.

The primitive reptilian part of our brain called the amygdala interprets change as a threat to our safety and control, putting us into fight, flight or freeze mode. Even small or positive change can send people on a spiral of anxiety, confusion, distraction, and resistance – which can play out in a host of damaging ways in the workplace.

Understanding the basic neuroscience of why people resist change can help you understand how to deal with it in your business. While you can't control how your people react, you can influence their response by the way you communicate and lead.

Resistance is real and has reasons

It's easy to dismiss those who resist change as just choosing to be difficult, particularly if they're in a well-paid job with good conditions. But in most cases, people resist change for a reason. In her book *Transforming Norm: Leading the Change to a Mentally Healthy Workforce*, **Tanya Heaney-Voogt** outlines eight reasons people resist change. I've added a ninth and explained how you can adjust your messaging and leadership to address each one.

1. They disagree there is a need for change

You need to go harder on explaining the “why” part of your message. Help people understand why the change is necessary.

2. They agree on the need for change but not the solution

In addition to explaining why the change is needed, you need to make clear what other options were considered and why this one was landed on.

3. They resist the sender of the message

You need to focus on building trust with your people, whether you are the sender or someone else is.



4. They are uncertain of what change means for them

You need to create more clarity for your team about the “who, what, when, where, why and how” of the change. Look at the change from their perspective. How does it impact them? What are the benefits to them? What are the downsides?

5. They fear loss

This is often valid, particularly if the change relates in a tangible loss for them. In this case, you need to deal with the feelings of your people, empathise and support them through their emotional response.

6. They resist because they can, it's “fun” and they're jaded

This is a real challenge. In these circumstances, setting clear expectations for behaviour and holding people to account is vital. Outline what's OK (feeling the emotion) and what's not OK (the poor behaviour). Be careful about giving too much time to the haters.

7. They were told, not consulted

Communicate early and often. If they were not consulted for a reason, explain why. For example, if the change had to happen immediately because of a new government regulation, tell them that.

8. They have change fatigue or work overload

Change fatigue is real. Sometimes it's not the change itself that is the issue, it's the fact that it's another change on top of a heavy workload that is the problem. In this case, reset priorities for your team and do what you can to clear the decks and create space. Cut or delay anything that is a “nice to do” rather than “have to do” right now. Beware of bundling too many unrelated changes together.

9. They've experienced poor change before and don't trust this will be different

Acknowledge the failures of the past, outline the learnings you've had, and explain how it will be different this time. Don't simply expect them to take your word for it, back up what you say with action.

One reason is enough for people to rebel against a change, but if you hit on multiple resistance points because your change has been poorly communicated and led, expect high emotion and potential conflict – both of which will slow down your implementation of change. Your change will not be successful unless you steer your people toward acceptance. Investing the time upfront to get your messaging right and deal with the feelings of your people will almost always save you time by minimising resistance and people problems later on.

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