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## **What You Need, Not What You Want (Part II)**

**Law Department Management**



The more leaders help employees feel properly and adequately informed, the better employees are able to deal with impending changes. In addition to dealing with the changes, leaders can go further and get recipient buy-in and participation by going the extra step and involving them in the process. Further, the goal of our communication is to have the change make rational sense to them, as they will be ready for change only when it makes sense.

There is no shortage of strategies that we can implement to reduce resistance including training, communication, participation, and involvement, to name a few. However, implementing these strategies, just as change itself, needs to be carefully considered and incorporated in a manner that best brings the change recipients along, so as not to damage trust.

Much of what we know about change and resistance focuses on the causes for the resistance, and leaves it to leadership to implement a solution. However, leaders need to focus on root causes, not the resistance.

It is only by understanding what drives the feelings of the change recipients that we can begin to address why the change failed. In those instances, resistance will be the scapegoat; but resistance isn't the problem, failing to address the origin of resistance is the real culprit.

Our best tool is to understand that resistance is a resource. All resistance to change is not an indication that those affected by the change oppose it; instead it should be seen as information outlining their concerns, fears, or perceptions of flaws in the plan. We would benefit from viewing resistance as a resource for improving the change initiative and process.

As much as change recipients want to positively impact the culture and environment in which they

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work or serve, what they want even more is to be heard. It is one thing for us to provide them an opportunity to speak; it is a whole other thing for us to say, “we heard you” and then to explain why we are or are not including or implementing their suggestions, or how we are addressing their concerns.

Leaders need to be careful not to create a culture where employees do not feel entitled to speak up and be heard. Leaders need to evaluate past words and deeds to see if past dialogue discouraged communication with followers.

No two organizations are exactly alike. Similarly, no two change initiatives are exactly alike. Even in circumstances where we have been open and above-board with a proposed change initiative one time, we may find it necessary under some other set of circumstances to handle the design and communication of another change differently. However, with that said, those we lead still want to be involved. Leaders have to decide the level, and timing, of that involvement on a case-by-case basis.

We need to not only plan the change we want to implement; we need to plan for the new organization that needs to develop to make our implementation successful. This includes open and honest communication about the change elements, the challenges that we will likely face during the transition, and continuous communication throughout the entire process.

Finally we have to hear the hard stuff that employees have to say and address that input. Where it is helpful to improve the change plan, that input should be incorporated into the plan and where it is not, we have to say why it is not being used. Those we lead have as much of a vested interest in the success of change as does leadership, and to ignore their experiences, seeing it as resistance, is to imperil the planned change.

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**Whitnie Wiley** was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.