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# Resistance to Change

By Lothar Katz

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Over the past forty or so years, Change Management went from a largely ignored leadership aspect to becoming a field in itself. Practitioners and researchers developed comprehensive process definitions, there are now numerous models analyzing indicators of and reasons for people resisting change, and you can apply countless recommended strategies for overcoming such resistance and managing change effectively.

One question, though, largely remains unanswered: "What do I need to do differently when trying to manage change effectively across cultures?"

After all, cultural differences are hard to overlook when it comes to resistance to change. Compare the way the Japanese deal with their nation's long economic decline and the 2011 tsunami and Fukushima disasters with the Greek reaction to that country's severe economic crisis: the former respond with great patience and stoic attitudes, the latter with angry protests and forceful resistance. Or contrast the way in which Germany raised its mandatory retirement age (from 65 to 67) to how the French dealt with a similar change (from 60 to 62): a few weeks of rather tame protests here, several years of sometimes-violent resistance there.

Make no mistake: we're not discussing 'good' or 'bad' here. The point is that just as individuals respond differently to change, there is an often strong cultural component to the ways people in different countries and cultures deal with it. As always when it comes to working globally, one cannot assume that the strategies that are most effective in one place will be equally effective elsewhere.

Below are four helpful questions to ask yourself when managing global change. To be sure, they have as much to do with your own behaviors as they do with the values and practices of the culture(s) you are dealing with:

## **Are you making the reasons for, and the implications of, the change clear enough?**

Ambiguity, whether it is about costs, equipment, jobs, or other aspects, can trigger negative reactions among those affected by change. How intense those reactions could become depends to no small degree on how people deal generally with [uncertainty](#). You'll want to spend much more time helping people understand upcoming changes when dealing with members of cultures where uncertainty is viewed a strong negative.

## **Did you consult those affected by the proposed change to the appropriate extent?**

Most people like to know what's going on, especially if their jobs may be affected, and are generally happier when 'in the know' about upcoming changes. What constitutes appropriate involvement, however, may look different across cultures, both national and corporate. Members of egalitarian or particularistic cultures (see also '[Order, Please!](#)') tend to expect greater involvement in decision making than those of authoritarian and universalistic ones, where decisions are generally made at the top and/or follow processes, rules, and established practices.

**Does the change threaten to modify established patterns of working relationships between people, and if yes, how relevant is that?**

Nobody likes seeing their work relationships disrupted. How much of an issue it creates when that happens, though, is influenced by cultural views of the importance of [business relationships](#). Such views must be carefully considered before making change decisions.

**Does the change threaten power or status in your organization?**

Job worries tend to be universally intensive. That's not necessarily the case for power and status. The relevance of [status and respect](#) varies greatly across cultures. [Saving face](#) may be crucially important to some, while little more than an abstract concept to others. Accordingly, changes that may be deemed minor in one culture could elsewhere be viewed as a major attack on some, or even all, of the players' pride and self esteem.

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project and Risk Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center Instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.

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