

LET'S BURY THE TERM "RESISTANCE"

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ABSTRACT

This article was inspired by a talk this author heard ten years ago given by Fritz Steele, one of the leading thinkers in the field of Organization Development, who, in a fireside chat about OD, piqued my interest by saying something to the effect of, "I'm beginning to believe there is no such thing as resistance."¹ At the time, this author thought it a ludicrous notion and dismissed it out of hand. Yet as my practice as an Organization Development consultant has evolved, I began to see the seed of brilliance in such a statement.

The Traditional View of Resistance

If you take Dr. Steele's comment literally, the idea that resistance does not exist seems implausible. The idea of resistance has been around in the field of Organization Development since its inception. Much of the early writings of the founding fathers of Organization Development relating to the management of change focused on the question of how to deal with organizational resistance.² Resistance, it was postulated, is a natural process of any organizational change effort. The more you anticipate resistance, learn its underlying causes (e.g., fear, threat, discomfort with change), and then address them, the more effective the change effort. Early efforts to manage resistance gave rise to much of the collaborative consulting techniques that endure today.

A Different view

This article offers a completely different view of resistance — that it is merely an interpretation, and exists only to the degree we view people and organizations from a framework of conflict and power. In this article, this writer intends to show that the very act of labeling individuals or groups as resisting gives the resistance power and also does not allow for a much deeper, more effective way of looking at organizations, people, and the process of growth and change.

By examining two traditional and enduring models for organizational intervention, this article demonstrates that how consultants approach the consulting process, and the lenses through which they look has a great deal of impact on the dynamics of resistance they see. By looking at the assumptions of resistance that underlie the traditional approaches to OD consulting, this article questions the notions of resistance OD consultants have held in the past and offers a viable, more effective alternative.

THE TRADITIONAL PARADIGM OF ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

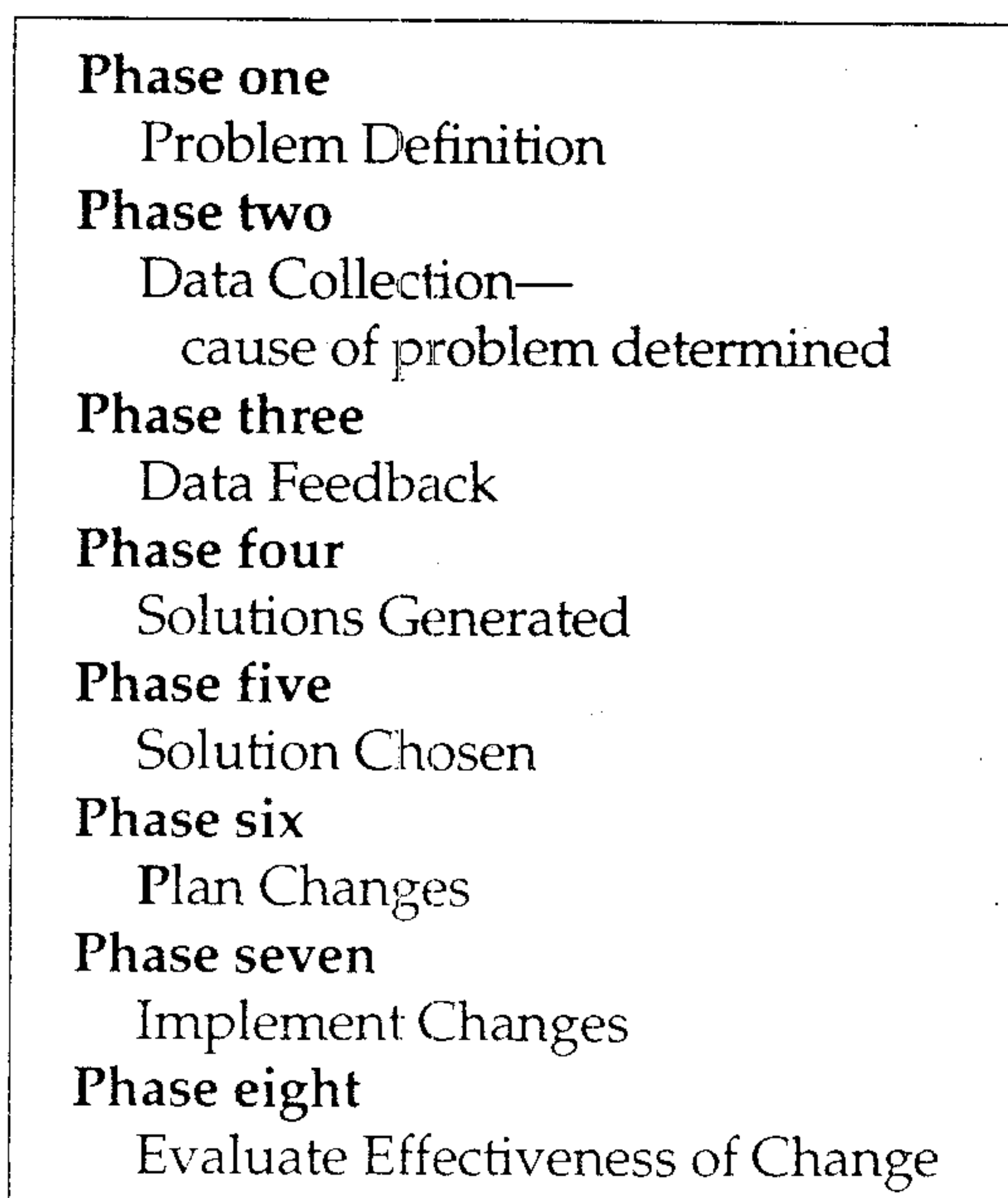
The field of Organization Development was founded under one simple premise, that it is possible to help organizations manage change or become more productive through the planned application of the social and behavioral sciences. The early founders of the field sought ways of helping organizations grow by applying such ideas as force field analysis, developmental models of human and organizational behavior, and the process of problem solving and creativity. In addition, the early founders held values about the importance of collaborative approaches to decision making, and the importance of honest and caring feedback. These values thankfully endure in the field of Organization Development, yet underneath the approaches we

use to help organizations grow are some assumptions about the dynamics of managing change and the process of intervening in organizations that limit our ability to help organizations accomplish their aims. To understand this, let's look at two pervasive approaches to managing change and their underlying assumptions: the problem-solving process and force field analysis.

Problem Solving Process

The problem-solving model of organizational intervention is based on the concept of action research. Action research is a term coined years ago in the field of OD to depict the notion that research need not be designed purely for knowledge's sake, but also to influence decisions and ignite action.³ In the traditional problem-solving approach (see figure 1), the OD consultant goes into an organization and collects data (does research) to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, or to understand other dynamics relevant to their inquiry. He or she then feeds back the data to a select group of people in the organization who, on the basis of a collective diagnosis of the organization, make decisions. The organization implements these decisions and then collects further data to see if these changes improved the organization. The process then begins over again.

Figure 1. The problem-solving process.



When done well, the strength of this linear problem solving approach to organizations is threefold: 1) it is typically based on valid data as opposed to collective assumptions or biases of the organization; 2) decisions are made to improve the organization that have some reasonable chance of being implemented because they are made together by a leading group in the organization; and 3) it includes many members of the organization in the process of analysis and thereby increases buy-in from the organization as a whole to whatever changes emerge.

While there are significant variations on the above theme, this approach to organizational development seems to endure due to its practicality and elegant simplicity. Many consultants have had a fair bit of success using this model and its strengths are clear. There are a couple of features embedded in the model, however, that have significant ramifications on the dynamics that surface in using this approach.

There are two key phases in this approach where we experience what is often referred to as resistance: the feedback phase and the implementation phase.

The Feedback Phase

During the feedback phase, clients often disagree with or "resist" the data. In some cases they disagree with the things consultants label as organizational weaknesses. (Consultants sometimes call these "opportunities," "perceived weaknesses," "potential weaknesses," et cetera, to soften the blow. But no matter what they call them, the client sees the underlying message — "you ain't doing so well in these areas.") During the feedback phase, not only do clients question the data, they question the research methodology, and they question whether this just was not the best time to get a fair picture.

This disagreement is almost always polite and rarely if ever the cause not to continue, but disagreement and "resistance"

seems to be there nonetheless. How can there not be? Through the consultant, their people are calling into question the efficacy of their leadership. In such situations, the natural tendency is to want to defend.

Interestingly, as a way to mitigate this disagreement, consultants often do their best to balance the feedback, to give as much "positive" feedback as "negative." Consultants do this to demonstrate they are unbiased (consultants are never unbiased) and to reinforce some of the "positive" features of the organization. But underneath it all, consultants often consciously or subconsciously focus on weaknesses for at least five mutually reinforcing reasons:

1. The dynamics of the data collection process often dictates the focus. When consultants go into an organization, promise confidentiality and say to interviewees "tell me about your organization," clients often see this as an opportunity (perhaps for the first time) to vent some of their feelings. Naturally, what will surface are frustrations, complaints, criticisms, etc. Hence the data is often heavily weighted to the negative.
2. In most cases, consultants are asked to work with the organization because the organization is hurting at some level and wants the consultant to help them alleviate the pain. Naturally, there will be a tendency to identify and focus on the sources of pain.
3. When clients improve on their weaknesses, there will be a demonstrated change in the organization, thereby insuring the client's investment is justified.
4. If there were few weaknesses, consultants are sometimes afraid there will be no impetus to change.
5. Focusing on the counterproductive features of the organization is more dramatic, and many consultants love drama — drama sells.

So the weaknesses come out, the clients "resist" and consultants then see the "resistance" as another example of "weakness." Being trained in working in the "here and now," the consultant will often point to the resistance and say "you see, this is part of the dynamics I am talking about."

In most cases what consultants are seeing is not resistance at all. Rather, a consulting approach that focuses on "problems" in an organization has a natural tendency to evoke feelings of resentment in that the consultant's description of the client's organization is heavily weighted and inaccurate. Moreover, focusing on problem detection and problem solving is reactive in nature. In problems solving, the focus is on fixing what doesn't work as opposed to creating what does work. When the consultant says "this is broken," he or she is in effect saying to the client "you are the one who broke it." Admitting that their organization is broken is something clients are understandably hesitant to do.

During these moments of feedback, clients are likely feeling enormous ambivalence. On the one hand they are probably feeling: "I know my organization is not effective. I believe in the truth, and I want to fix it, so I am thankful this conversation is occurring." On the other hand, they are also likely to be feeling: "I don't like that we have created something that is broken. I don't want to admit I have put an enormous amount of energy into something that is as ineffective as is depicted by this data being presented to me." The former feeling is why the client hired the consultant in the first place, the latter is what the consultant often experiences energetically from the client during the first phase of problem solving. This experience is what we consultants often call "resistance."

The Implementation Phase

The second place where OD consultants often experience resistance is during the implementation phase. During this phase, the client often drags his feet, has enormous

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difficulty implementing, or, even worse, says "Thank you very much for your insights . . . We'll call you (meaning adios senior)." This period of "resistance" is frustrating for consultants, because most are committed to the organization changing, not just producing organizational analyses that collect dust on the book shelf. When consultants see "resistance" at this phase of our consulting, it often feels threatening. It points to the possibility the consultant's efforts will not be as successful as he or she had hoped.

When a consultant frames a client's behavior as resistance, it is likely because he or she fears the behavior. It is seen as behavior that will get in the way of change. By seeing it this way, the consultant is judging the behavior as negative. In effect, the consultant is resisting the client's "resistance." If the axiom that "what we resist persists" is true, then unwittingly the consultant has contributed to the very behavior he or she fears.

FORCE FIELD ANALYSIS

Force field analysis was first developed by Kurt Lewin as a way of understanding the forces that support and inhibit change.⁴ The purpose of such an analysis is to point to the forces in the organization that need to shift in order to support effective implementation of a new system, new program, new organization effort, etc.

The dynamics of feeding back data using force field analysis is quite parallel to the problem solving approach, and invokes much the same levels of resistance described above. Let's look at an example to illustrate the point. This author and a colleague recently had a client that had been trying to create and implement an effective inventory system for many years, with no success. They asked us to help them understand why they have not succeeded, and what they can do about it. After interviewing many key members of the client system, we created the following force field analysis.

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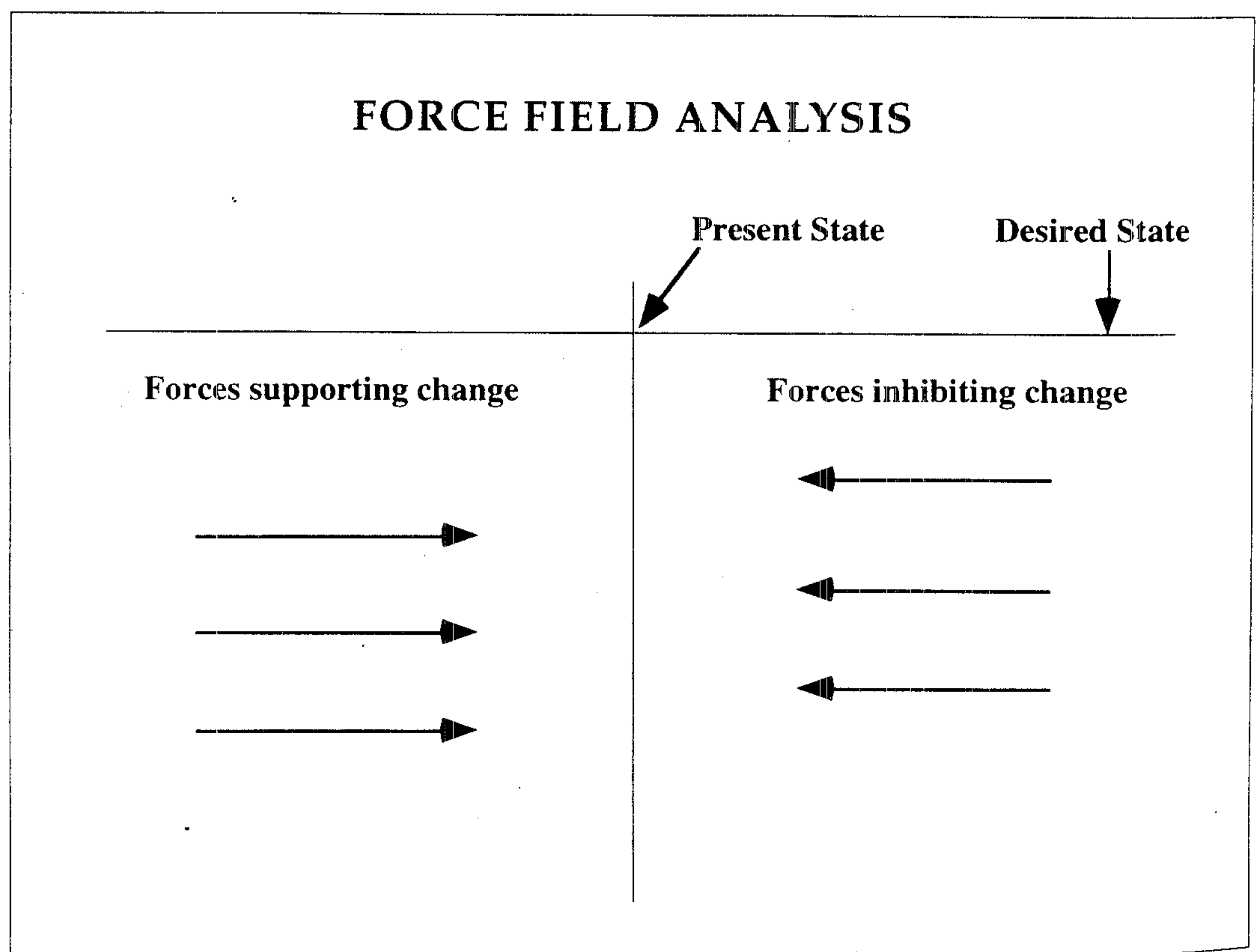


Figure 2. Force Field Analysis

While there were many factors supporting the creation of an effective inventory system, the resisting forces far outweighed the supporting forces. These factors included such things as:

- Lack of teamwork on the part of upper management
- High turnover rate of leadership
- Inventory was seen as a low priority
- Little focus on the big picture
- Internal politics

Interestingly, this was an organization that had been stuck in its ways for years. The difficulty in creating an inventory system was but one of many management programs, projects, and efforts that started and failed.

The key premise behind force field analysis is that the human dynamics of change follow two principles: 1) A person's or group's behavior is based on the totality of both positive and negative forces influencing that person or group; and 2) these forces tend to counterbalance each other and lead the group toward the status quo. According to theory, a group or organization is far more likely to effect change by reducing the resisting forces than by increasing the driving forces, because if you increase the driving forces, you will often get an equal and opposite reaction from the organization and thereby reaffirm the status quo.

Based on these assumptions, we fed back the data to our client. Following the traditional view of force field analysis, we strongly suggested that to create a new inventory system, they would likely have the greatest chance of success by focusing on reducing the forces on the right hand side. As we described these forces to the upper management team, they squirmed in their seats, and with great discomfort acknowledged they had to do something about them. At the same time they raised some significant reservations about a new inventory system, and began to talk about why it may not be as important as they thought. **AHA!!! RESISTANCE.**

Our tendency at this point was to focus on their feelings and help them see the fears or sense of being overwhelmed that may be underlying their hesitancy. However, as we looked at the situation from the viewpoint that we may have unwittingly contributed to their resistance, we considered the possibility that what they were feeling might be a subconscious reaction to our focus on the forces that inhibited change. Could it be that we were seeing a manifestation of the fact that we had just presented to them the features of their system that were "broken" and were getting back the same kind of reaction consultants get in an organizational problem-solving process when they focus on what's not working? This author believes the answer to the above question is a resounding "yes."

While force field analysis is a useful concept in principle, this author finds it a far better model for understanding organizations than it is for changing them. While the assumption that any organization's present condition is the net effect of many forces may be correct, the model has a couple of fundamental assumptions embedded in it that limit its effectiveness in helping OD consultants facilitate change.

- 1) Like the problem solving model, there is an inherent judgement built in the model (or the way we often use the model): that the inhibiting or resisting forces are undesirable and must be removed.
- 2) When consultants follow the principles under which it lies, they focus on breaking down something as opposed to building something.

Questioning the fundamental assumptions of the models consultants use to facilitate change and explore alternatives offers clues to more powerful approaches to the consulting process.

A MORE POTENT VIEW OF RESISTANCE

In the traditional view of Organization Development, the tools and techniques for helping organizations grow focus on problem detection and problem solution. In such a view, an organization is seen as a set of countervailing forces, which together form the organization's dynamics. To intervene effectively, the consultant helps the client identify blocks to organizational effectiveness, and then helps the organization remove those blocks. In such a view, resistance is the feature of the organization that is in the way of removing those blocks or in achieving the highest levels of performance.

An alternative, more systemic view is that the organization is an amalgam of forces that together comprise the system called an organization. Resistance, in this alternative view, is simply the expression of differing views. If a consultant, or anyone else for that matter, does not allow for that expression, the resistance will persist. In other words, the thing consultants call resistance is actually the expression of differing desires, wants, needs and feelings. Desires, wants, needs and feelings have an energetic quality to them. Interestingly, the word emotion has as its root the term motion implying that our desires, wants, needs and feelings create movement in us as human systems. This movement is, in effect, a form of energy which, if channeled, can aid the organizational growth process.

During the implementation phase of problem solving, for example, rather than resistance, what is often occurring is a form of "organizational ambivalence." That is, many in the organization view the planned organizational changes as positive, yet many may not. What consultants may be seeing is not resistance to change but the expression of alternative wants. Looking at the dynamics this way opens up more positive approaches to managing change.

One of my clients, for example, hired me to help his organization improve the way they managed themselves. He is the Director of a division of a large company and found that three of his key managers were not terribly focused on effective people management. This was a research-driven organization, and these managers seemed to care far more about the technical end of their research than on the human side of the organization. This frustrated the Director, for he and two other managers felt that many opportunities for synergy and for more effective applications of their research were lost, due to what they considered the myopic focus of the other managers.

I began to work with the group by conducting an organizational assessment and feeding back the results to key members of the organization. My findings focused on a number of different areas, and verified many people's feeling that indeed there were many opportunities lost as a result of their organization's narrow technical focus. They decided to do something about this. Over the next few months they worked on improving their teamwork and on developing mechanisms for greater employee input into decisions. These changes helped the organization greatly, yet the three managers continued to manage in the way they had grown accustomed and denigrated the Director's efforts to change the organization.

If you take a blame-oriented view, you might say the three managers are resisting. They are blocking a healthy and vital change in the organization. If you take the point of view, however, that all behavior is, in part, the expression of desires, then what we are seeing is the expression of differing desires moving in different directions. Such a view does not judge the three managers, but rather suggests that the key to successful change is in supporting the full expression of their differing desires and finding ways of working with them.

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I took this view during a key management meeting recently and encouraged my clients to do the same. In so doing, we found the conversation far more productive than previous conversations, and many issues surfaced that otherwise might not have. For example, we found that two of the three "resisting" managers were quite interested in the people end of management, but each felt hampered in their own way from being more effective in this area. In addition, both had differing views of the direction the organization needed to take, and felt that their views were not listened to by the Director. We addressed these differences in a series of meetings and in the process, helped them discover ways they can bridge these views. At present, both managers are far more satisfied with the direction the organization is taking than before.

The third manager, by the way, continues to hold the view that all of this "people focus" is a bunch of baloney. Rather than fight this, the group has chosen to respect his view and continue working together. While not the best of all worlds, this too feels like a far better solution than their push-pull, right-wrong orientation of the past. Rather than see resistance as energy moving, consultants (like most human beings) often see it as a block. It is only a block from a narrow "this is what I want and you are in the way" view. It is an opportunity to bridge differences and gain shared understanding from this alternative perspective.

To summarize:

1. Consultants often create or contribute to the phenomenon they call resistance by focusing on "what's not working."
2. Clients may not be resistant to change at all, but expressing differing views of what is truth and differing views of the kind of organization they want to be a part of.

How a Consultant Thinks May Create the Resistance

Consultants not only create resistance by the approach they take to consulting, but also by their own state of being. For example, consultants tend to focus on resistance because they fear it, and judge it as counter-productive (how many of us have said "thank God for the resistance here?"). By judging the resistance, consultants invite further feelings of resistance in reaction to the judgement. In effect, by calling it resistance, consultants reinforce the resistance or even worse, play a part in its creation.

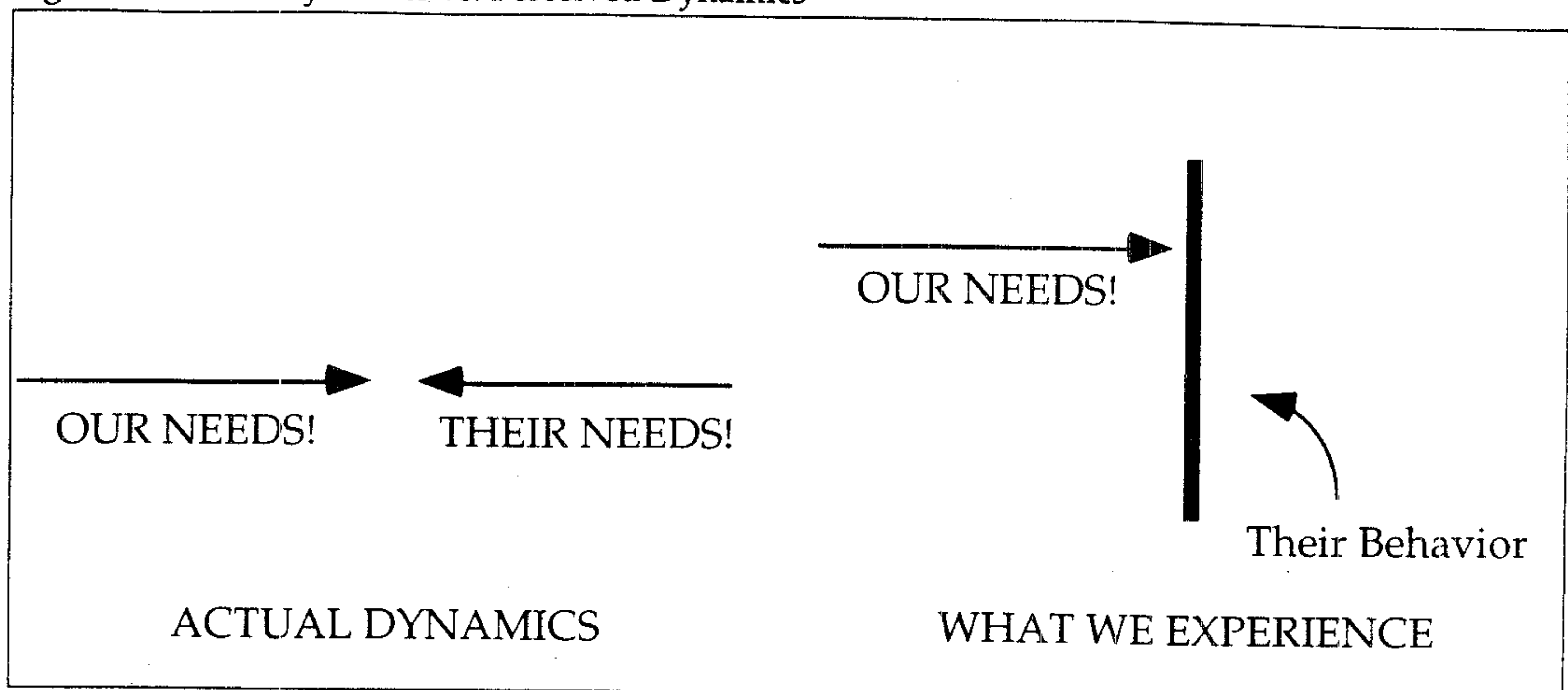
Another way of looking at how we create resistance⁵ is that the resistance consultants experience in others is often a mirror of their own resistance. For example, when a consultant has reservations or resistance to the direction he or she wishes to take their work, this reservation will likely be communicated in non-verbal ways as well as in conflicting verbal messages. Others detect this reservation and are less apt to follow the consultant's lead. In effect, the consultant's reservation speaks to and invites others' reservations. On the other hand, when the consultant is unconflicted in his or her views, his or her vision and communications are far more powerful, and often draw others toward the direction the consultant seeks by the strength of his or her commitment.

Vision is the Key

If, instead of resistance, clients are expressing differing views, and/or mirroring our own resistance, then the challenge in effecting organizational change is not in managing the push and pull of organizational dynamics, nor is it in managing resistance. The greater challenge in facilitating change is to focus on the process of creating alignment and commitment to a new organizational vision. The creation of such a vision requires the leadership of the client organization to articulate its new vision, and then mobilize the organization's forces to achieve that vision. A powerful and

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Figure 3: Actual Dynamics vs. Perceived Dynamics



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compelling organizational vision often includes such things as the purpose of the organization, the organization's mission, the strategic direction of the organization, the kind of culture it aspires to, and the unique competencies of the organization that, if leveraged, give the organization its competitive advantage.

Generating commitment for change through vision bypasses the tendency to create resistance, for it draws people toward the change rather than pushing them into it. The kind of vision that compels members is one that empowers the greatest amount of people in the organization. If the vision empowers self to the exclusion of others or others to the exclusion of self, resistance will naturally follow. When it is inclusive and challenging, without being watered down to the common denominator, it bridges differences and invites commitment.

For example, prior to my involvement, one of my client organizations had been in the process of trying to implement a Total Quality Management initiative for well over two years with little to show in terms of results. Part of the difficulty had been that some of the people in upper management, including the CEO, were committed to TQM, while others did not think it was necessary at all. One executive, in particu-

lar, has been so gung ho on TQM that not only has he required his whole division to learn and use the tools and techniques of continuous improvement but almost demanded that other executives do the same. Without feeling the same fervor, the other executives developed their own approach to Total Quality and/or have given lip service to it. At the same time, we are describing a team of executives that do not surface well their differing points of view. And so as an executive team they have agreed for two years to go ahead with the Total Quality initiative while at least two key members of the executive team did not really want to and have not introduced Total Quality into their organization. Part of their concern is that TQM is too analytic and data driven and would stifle the creativity of their parts of the organization. Another concern is that TQM is too rote and rigid in nature, and does not allow for alternative approaches to organizational improvement.

If you take a narrow "TQM is what is needed" view of the dynamic, you might say the two key members are resisting. They are blocking what another part of the organization wants. If you take the point of view, however, that the vision for TQM in the organization may not work because it is effective for one group and perhaps limiting for another, then the challenge is to

create a vision that challenges and empowers all key members toward an exciting and compelling direction.

On the basis of this latter view, I took the group offsite for a two-day visioning session. The purpose of the session was to discover or create a vision for the organization that excites and challenges all key members of the organization. For this session, we had in one room the senior executive staff, the Board of Directors, a group of key investors, and members of each of the operating divisions. Through a series of exercises, I was able to get each constituent group to articulate its vision for the company, and then have them weave their visions into one overarching view of the direction of their company.

This process was particularly exciting because they found among their visions a unifying view of the future of their organization. They were also able to see that all along they have shared a similar view but had not articulated that view in a way that mobilized them in a shared direction. We are now in the process of generating clear strategic goals for the organization to ensure everyone is focused on the same areas to grow the company.

While all of the above did not come without some heated discussions, the result has been and continues to be an organization more clear and committed to a shared direction. I might add that the organizational changes that have followed since this visioning meeting are wholeheartedly supported by the two "resisting" members and are in my view consistent with the spirit of TQM, although with much of the trappings of TQM have been left behind.

In conclusion, by focusing on what the organization needs to create, the consultant is not bypassing the issues that come up in problem-solving processes or in force field analyses, nor is he or she ignoring the obstacles or points of "resistance." Rather, in this vision-driven paradigm for consulting, the

process of consulting is the process of helping the organization create a new organization context, one in which higher order problems emerge. By focusing on vision first, and helping the organization move toward that vision, the kinds of issues that arise are:

- a. Do we even have a shared purpose or reason for being?
- b. Do we have a sense of our core competencies, ones we can leverage and build upon?
- c. Do we view strategy in a way that helps us mobilize our forces and at the same time adapt to a changing environment?
- d. Are we clear as to what must endure in our organization (such as our values) and what can and often must change to grow and develop?
- e. How do we measure and reinforce the things we care about?

While it is not the intention of this article to fully explicate a vision-oriented approach to facilitating change, I believe that this new and growing approach to Organization Development is critical to the success of the field as a discipline.⁶ While more is needed to understand the full impact and value underlying this approach, enough is understood today to suggest that driving one's change process by a clear vision of the future is, in most cases, a necessary condition for success. The questions above, as well as the assumptions which underlie them, form only the tip of the iceberg of a much deeper level of inquiry. Nevertheless, when consultants help clients approach the change process with a clear vision in mind, and take steps to help clients commit to that vision, the process creates a powerful alignment of energy in the organization. When we as consultants learn to master this new approach, we will have far greater success than the approaches to Organization Development we have taken in the past.

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REFERENCES

- ¹ I heard Fritz Steele speak at a fireside chat sponsored by the Boston OD Network. While I may not have captured his thoughts verbatim, this is to the best of my recollection the essence of his comment, and in part one of the themes of his talk. Fireside chats are a series of meetings where a key leader in the field of OD expounds on his experience as a consultant.
- ² See Coch, L. and French, J.R.P. (1948). "Overcoming Resistance to change," *Human Relations*, Volume 1, pp. 512-532 for one example of such early thinking.
- ³ See French, W. L. and Bell, C. H. (1978). *Organization Development*, Second Edition, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, pp. 94-98 for a succinct explanation of the action research model and its role in organization development.
- ⁴ See "Kurt Lewin's 'Force Field Analysis'" in Jones and Pfeiffer (1973), *The Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators*, pp. 111-113 for a more full explanation of force field analysis. For a more detailed theoretical understanding, see Marrow, A. J. (1969). *The Practical Theorist: The Life and Work of Kurt Lewin*, N.Y. Basic Books Inc., pp. 29-39.
- ⁵ I want to express my deep appreciation to Ron Tilden, a colleague and friend of mine, who helped me see this subtle, yet important way of looking at resistance.
- ⁶ See Adams, J. ed. (1984). *Transforming Work*, Mills River Press for a more complete explanation of a variety of vision-driven approaches to organizational growth and change. See Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday for a recent analysis of the importance of vision to an organization's effectiveness.