

# Managing Organizational Change

Process, Social Construction and  
Dialogue

Second Edition

Lecture Notes Chapter 10

# 10

## **UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL RESISTANCE**

## Learning objectives

By the time you have completed your study of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Understand the reasons why resistance occurs.
- Identify the role of social construction in managing resistance.
- Explain why a conversational approach is especially suited to our understanding of resistance.
- Explore types of background conversations.
- Evaluate strategies for managing organizational resistance.

**In this chapter** we discuss resistance as a central concept in managing change.

- To some extent, we play down the notion that people are at fault every time they resist.
- It is normal for individuals wanting to preserve some certainty to look for continuity of norms, skills, designs and patterns of communication.

**To begin our discussion:**

**Why is there resistance to change in organizations?**

It is true that resistance also occurs because change threatens established job and social relations.

*let's discuss ...*

Organizational resistance occurs when people witness a period in which the values, lessons and experiences of the past no longer provide a reliable guide to the present and that of the future.

Piderit (2000) criticizes research on resistance for its failure to take seriously the positive intentions of those who resist.

Importantly, she warns against using the label of 'resistance' to dismiss potentially valid employee concerns.

Watzlawick (1990) distinguishes between an 'objective' reality and a 'reality' **constructed** through conversations.

- First-order reality is the way in which we describe the attributes of a change being proposed as things independent of our own existence.
- Second-order reality refers to the **meanings** and **interpretations** we attach to the first-order reality.



A first-order reality is about mere descriptions of a change that is being proposed.

- Lacks communicative space with people.
- Interpretation and reflections are largely missing.
- Things are treated as objectified. **For example Treating TQM as a lever consisting of fixed rules and standards rather than collaboration between people.**

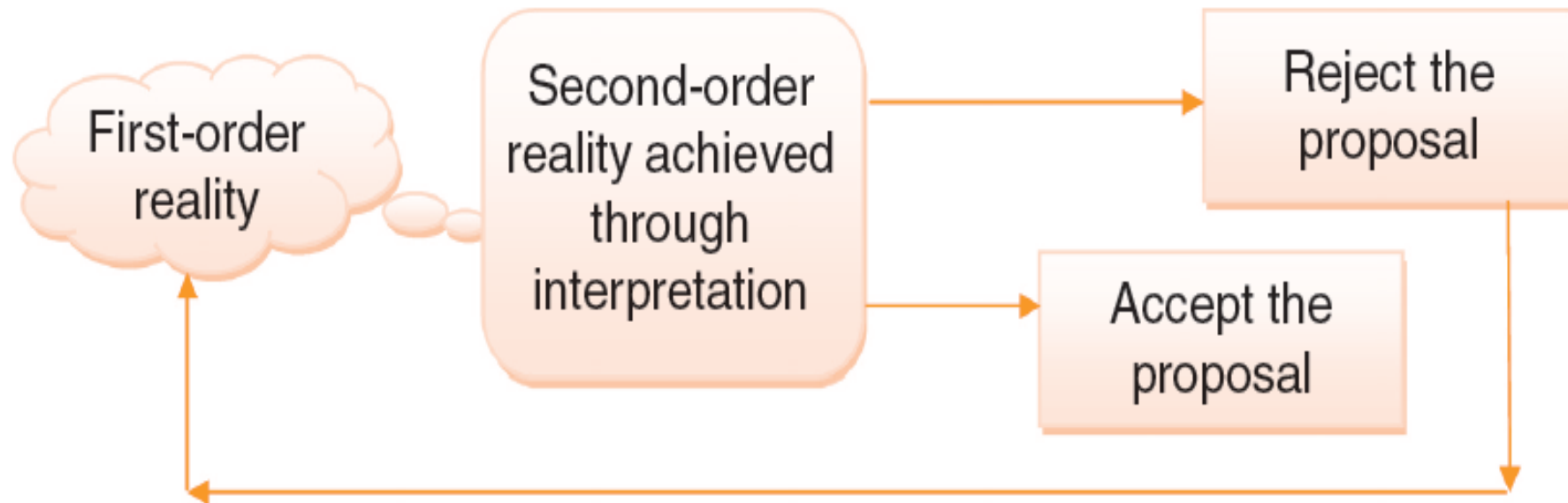
A second-order reality is produced in the 'space' between people.

Such a space takes place in conversations we all have.

For example:

**A says: 'TQM is the wrong way to go',**

**B says: 'TQM is the way we should go'.**



Ford et al. (2002: 105) note that seeing resistance as something negative 'ignores resistance as a socially constructed reality.'

To promote second-order reality, they propose a **typology** based on background conversations.

Their viewpoint is that which we can and we should be able to '**reinvent**' resistance.

## Examples of utterances likely to lead to a complacent conversation:

- **Why change?**
- **No rush and no worries**
- **We will succeed**
- **If it isn't broken, don't fix it**
- **Why mess with success?**
- **Don't rock the boat**

## Examples of utterances likely to lead to a resigned conversation

- **This probably won't work**
- **My position doesn't give me any power**
- **I don't have the right people supporting me**
- **We never get the support we need**
- **Our group never gets included**
- **What's the point of all this?**

## Examples of utterances likely to lead to a cynical conversation

- **This probably won't work**
- **My position doesn't give me any power**
- **I don't have the right people supporting me**
- **We never get the support we need**
- **Our group never gets included**
- **What's the point of all this?**

**Table 10.1** Examples of utterances made for each type of conversation

Type of conversation	Behavioural tendencies	Examples of utterances
<b>Complacent conversation</b>	Denial of the need for change; capitalizing on prior success for change; contentment and gratification	Why change? No rush and no worries We will succeed If it isn't broken, don't fix it Why mess with success? Don't rock the boat
<b>Resigned conversation</b>	Cause of failure is assigned to oneself or one's group or organization; low morale; non-participation; lack of willingness to engage	This probably won't work My position doesn't give me any power I don't have the right people supporting me We never get the support we need Our group never gets included What's the point of all this?
<b>Cynical conversation</b>	Involving doubts; contempt; mocking the change effort; sarcasm; mockery; disapproval	Nothing is new about all this It won't make any difference Who are they kidding? No one can make this work I don't know why they bother This won't work either Just more of the same old stuff

Source: Adapted from Ford and Ford (1995)



To bring about enduring change at a deeper level, conversations need to be altered by:

- Bringing background conversations into the present;
- Reinventing the past;
- Having conversations to bring about closure.

A change agent/team can help to change the realities that individuals construct among themselves:

- Viewing resistance as something positive.
- Bringing background conversations to the fore.
- Disengaging from the constraints of the past.
- Providing people with supports and opportunities.
- Helping people to produce breakthroughs.
- Co-constructing new realities through appreciative inquiry.

**Thank you**