

Blog > Culture

# Overcoming resistance to change within your organization

By **Kealy Spring**

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## What is resistance to change?

### 6 common reasons for resistance to change

### 6 tips to minimize resistance to change

### Bringing it all together

Ever heard the saying, “the only constant is change?” It's starting to become cliché. But also true. To a large extent, **change is inevitable**. In an organization, that change can come in many forms. Yet despite the constancy of it, people are overwhelmingly resistant to change.

It can be difficult to adjust to something new, but change isn't always a bad thing. Whether it is a new team member joining the group, another leaving, or perhaps the company itself going through some sort of organizational shift, it is important to plan and anticipate employee resistance to it. Employers can then implement key tools to **help employees manage it** more effectively.

# What is resistance to change?

Resistance to change is unwillingness to adapt to new circumstances or ways of doing things. It can happen with individuals, relationships, or within organizations. There are many reasons for resistance, but at its heart, resistance is rooted in **fear of the unknown**. People are biologically wired to look for patterns and predictability, and any uncertainty — even if it's anticipated or positive — can **trigger anxiety**.

# 6 common reasons for resistance to change

Resistance to change is common and can come in many forms. It can be subtle or overt, and it can be seen in both individuals or groups of people. Some examples might be missed meetings, sarcastic remarks, criticism, nitpicking, or even sabotage. The good news is, no matter what form it manifests, overcoming resistance to change is possible. However, organizations need to first understand the **causes of resistance** to more effectively address it.

## 1. Lack of trust

One reason for resistance to change is a lack of trust in the leadership team or the company as a whole. A **lack of trust** can have implications for turnover as well as employees giving leadership the benefit of the doubt when issues do arise.

Employees who resist a change initiative are often responding more to the person in the leadership position rather than the change itself. This comes about if those in leadership positions have not yet earned the trust of the employees, like when there is a new leader within the organization. It can also come about as a result of previous experiences that have caused employees to distrust leadership.

Distrust of the organization as a whole can also occur if employees feel their organization does not do as they say they will, changes too frequently, or employees generally don't feel valued. The most **highly rated and financially successful companies** are those that have the trust of their employees.

## 2. Poor communication

Lack of communication can greatly impact even the most well-thought-out and planned organizational changes. It is important to cultivate a culture of transparency whenever feasible and to share information as often as possible with employees, especially when trying to navigate a change. Without it, employees can become defensive, lack trust in leadership, and not have adequate time to process the information, which leads to further pushback.

If employees are not given information in a timely manner, especially in the fast-paced world of social media, misinformation and discontent can quickly spread through a workforce.

## 3. Emotional response

Emotions are a part of any organization and those that are employed in them. Ignoring or avoiding emotions does not make them go away. In fact, they are sure to surface in other (often confusing or overwhelming) ways if not addressed proactively.

Common emotional responses to change are fear, uncertainty, and worry. Employees might not be able to articulate how they are feeling. Or, they may not want to say it to leadership. But we get a sense of more negative emotions may be seen through comments they make or nonverbal cues. These signs of resistance might include eye-rolling or disengaging from conversations.

## 4. Fear of failure

Change can bring about a fear that it will be unsuccessful or that

the individuals involved will **personally fail** as a result of the changes that were made. Employees often worry this will negatively impact their performance reviews, their job security, and even have implications for pay. In turn, this can **lead to poorer outcomes at work**, in both output and the quality of the work being completed.

Our minds are amazingly adaptive, but an individual's brain can have a hard time focusing if fear of failure is a concern. This is because while some parts of the brain are actively engaging with the new information, other parts of the mind are shutting down. **Fear** has both physical and mental implications.

## 5. Surprises

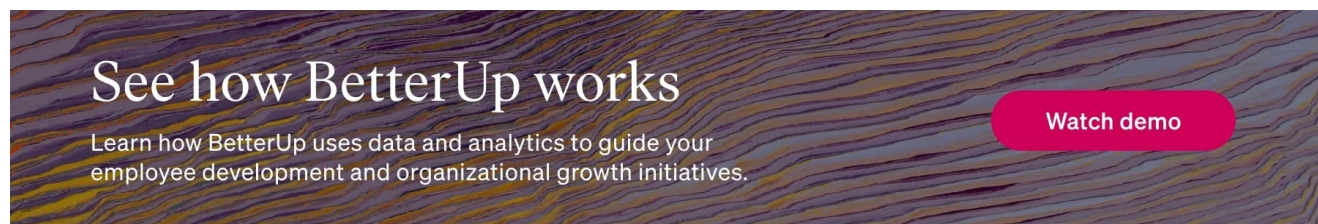
Some people like to be surprised, but many do not — particularly when it comes to work. They want predictability, including the ability to schedule their time accordingly. There is a natural law that explains this called **homeostasis**. It is the concept that there is a drive to get to a neutral or stable place. Implementing change can disrupt this potential homeostasis, causing alarm bells to go off.

Most employees have **families and responsibilities** outside of work that they have to manage in addition to their jobs. How will this change impact their lives both at work and outside of it? Are the deadlines or timelines for change manageable? Does it require a new skill set? Are they in danger of **losing their job**?

## 6. Constant change

Organizations can sometimes overlook the need to space multiple changes out. If you are constantly changing programs, leadership, or systems, employees are less likely to fully adapt to

and accept future change. Furthermore, in a [study](#) that looked at change management in organizations, employees who were going through changes currently or within the previous year were more likely to feel stressed out, have less [trust in their senior leaders](#), planned to find new jobs, and reported more health concerns. Timing of changes is important in order to minimize resistance to them.



## 6 tips to minimize resistance to change

Now that we have looked at some of the reasons people resist change, let's dive into some of the ways to overcome resistance to change, and how to implement change successfully.

### 1. Communicate early and often

Let employees know about changes to the status quo as soon as possible. Do you have an employee that others gravitate to, or whose opinions seem to carry more weight with their colleagues? Get buy-in from them and help them lead the changes you are hoping for. This helps to build a bridge between employees and management.

[Involving key stakeholders](#) as part of the change, especially those that are trusted by colleagues, can help others adapt more readily. Share whatever information you have with employees

that you are free to share. If you are not sure of an answer or cannot answer, it is okay to state that. You can say something like, “I don’t have that information” or “I’ll have to look into that” or even, “As soon as I can share that information with you I will.”

When there is a **lack of communication**, people tend to fill the void with speculation. The more open and honest in your communication with them, the less likely this is to happen.

## 2. Listen to employees

**Listen to employees'** concerns, as there is a good chance that they are more in tune with a plan’s potential blind spots given their day-to-day work. This also lets them know their opinions are valued by the company. While you do not have to incorporate all their ideas, listening will help you identify what sources of resistance are coming up and address the root causes.

For example, perhaps employees are concerned about the timeline of the proposed changes. This is often a valid concern. If you can, explain your **decision-making processes**. Looking at ways to address this with their buy-in, or more clearly articulating the rationale for that timeline, can save time and money in the long run.

## 3. Educate employees on the value of the change

Organizations are generally trying to make things better, not worse, for their employees. Perhaps the old way of doing things presented a potential safety issue, was ineffective or inefficient. Building a **case for why change** is necessary can help employees adapt to it more readily, even in cases where they may not like it. How will this change impact them directly? Will the change effort make something easier, better, or more efficient in the long run?

## 4. Name emotions

When we **name emotions**, we move the emotional response from an internal state (which is harder to address) to something outside the individual. Once feelings are out in the open they can be worked through.

In the case of organizational change, naming the fear, frustration, or anxiety that might be present can help employees work through them faster. Try saying something like, “I’m noticing there might be some anxiety or concern about this change,” to help open up the conversation. This gives permission to employees to also name their feelings about the change, which ultimately helps to give those emotions less power to affect them.

Leaders do not need to spend endless hours processing emotions, but it is good practice to **address the elephant** in the room. It can also provide valuable insights to leadership on what they need to address more proactively with employees.

## 5. Timing is everything

Things are always constantly changing and evolving with the passing of time. That said, within an organization, the timing of change can be important. It isn't always possible, but sometimes it is best for organizations to methodically introduce change and wait until that has stabilized before introducing further change. Even **companies that are "good at change"** sometimes need a pause.

Having a **strategic plan** in place that looks at the rollout of all known upcoming changes can help determine if any don't have enough time between them. Build in time leading up to the

change, during the change, and following the change — asking for ample feedback from employees along the way.

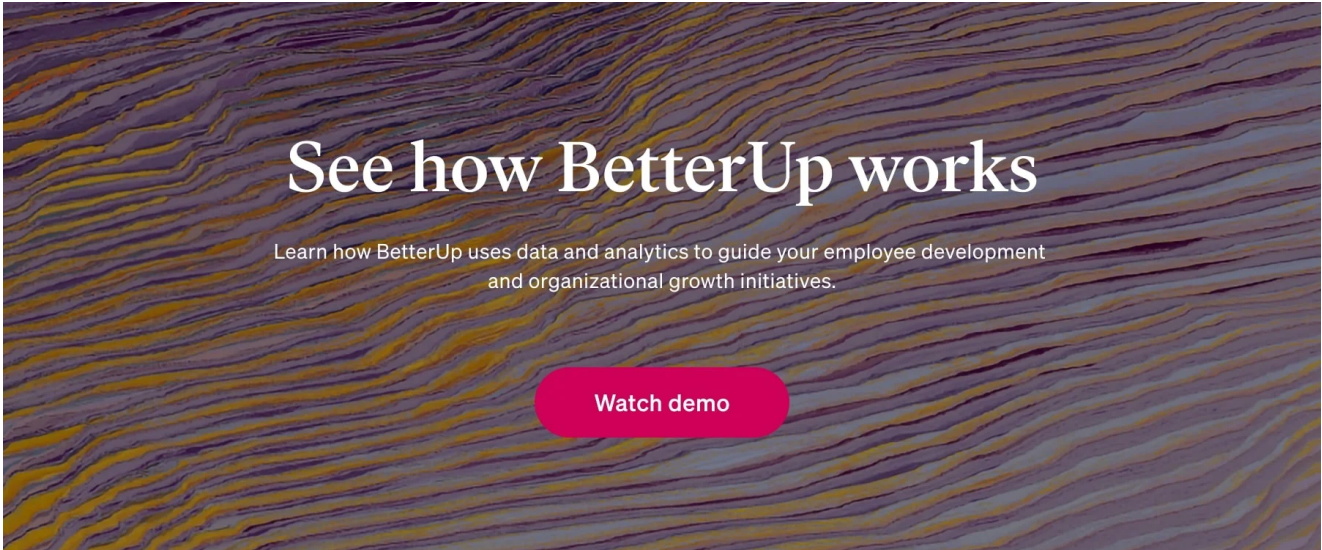
## 6. Provide ongoing support

Once a change has been made, make sure to follow up with employees as those changes roll out. Let them know that they continue to be important partners in making effective changes that will stand the test of time. Provide training for any new skills needed to make the change successful.

**Recognizing** both privately and publicly those that are helping facilitate the change or adapting to it, even in small ways, can further create employee satisfaction with the changes.

## Bringing it all together

Change can be hard for both employees and employers but with some planning and anticipation, it can be effectively managed. Keeping communication flowing to and from leadership as well as ensuring that companies are listening to employees and their concerns can help navigate any resistance to change that might arise along the way.



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**Kealy Spring**

BetterUp Coach

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