

Over my dead body!

by Allan Baktoft Jakobsen

The world is changing and most of us agree that we must change accordingly. Then why is it that we resist?

Resistance is ok!

You probably all recognize the situation: Someone is trying to change the way you live your life. "Follow this way", they say, these *chosen souls*, but how do they know what's right for you, and who are they to tell you? Personally, I would instinctively say *No*. Basically for two reasons: First, because I want to be in charge of my own life, and second: because it feels too risky. But that doesn't mean, that I never change: I spend a lot of time improving my own life.

Watts Humphrey stated it very precisely: "It's human nature to improve, but, paradoxically, they almost universally resist it." He goes on quoting Douglas Sherwin: "Change is great when you are its agent; it is only bad when you are its object."

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In the software business, technology is changing rapidly. On top of that, a small number of people are also trying to change the way, people work together to develop the software products. They claim that by changing the processes, they can improve the development.

The natural human response is obviously to say *No* (thanks) to software process improvements. Why? First of all, everybody already struggle hard dealing with the risks of the software itself. Creating software is a big challenge. Introducing new and unknown processes is a very risky thing to do. Suddenly, you might end up in a *two-front war*, unable to *focus*, and out of control.

As Weinberg once said: "*Resistance* is the consultant's label – *safety* is the clients." Or in the words of Henriette Ann Klausner: "Resistance is something we do when we do not feel safe."

This instinct has probable saved a lot of our ancestors, because when we do not feel safe there is often a very good reason for it, and we better react to it. "If you think resistance is bad, think of the alternative," again quoting Weinberg.

Change is certain, progress is not. [E.H. Carr]

E.H. Carr once said: "Change is certain, progress is not". That goes for software development, as well. If SPI really represents sure and convincing improvements, why are we still talking about it?

Deciding to change requires a cost-benefits analysis and other people can't always see the costs in the *shadow* that matters to *you*.

Changing is a very risky thing to do, and the better strategy is really to think twice before you set-off. You need a lot of ice in your stomach. And a lot of energy, too. Resistance in these situations is in fact a very positive thing, since it is showing that our built-in risk analysis is working.

Nature of Resistance

What makes all this so tricky is that when changes are being proposed to us, we don't just come forward and say: "What you just said scares my pants off. I am weak and I would like to resist for some time while I think, please!" It a dangerous world out there and exposing your weakness usually increases the risks.

No, the nature of resistance is far more complex. The measures of defense could be silence, humor, bluffing, or the best of all defenses: aggression. While our brain tries to think, our body usually says it all: Looking away, crossing arms, excessive smiling, yawning, you name it (just watch *Animal Planet*).

Young people usually resist less than older. That's not hard to understand: The young people have the energy, the old folks the experience, but as Oscar Wilde said: "Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes."

The nature of resistance not only varies with the individual human beings, it also varies in time. A common model for this, as I have seen it at several conferences, is Figure 1, showing phases of reaction to changes: Paralysis, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, exploitation, and acceptance, or alternatively, hidden but bitter hatred.

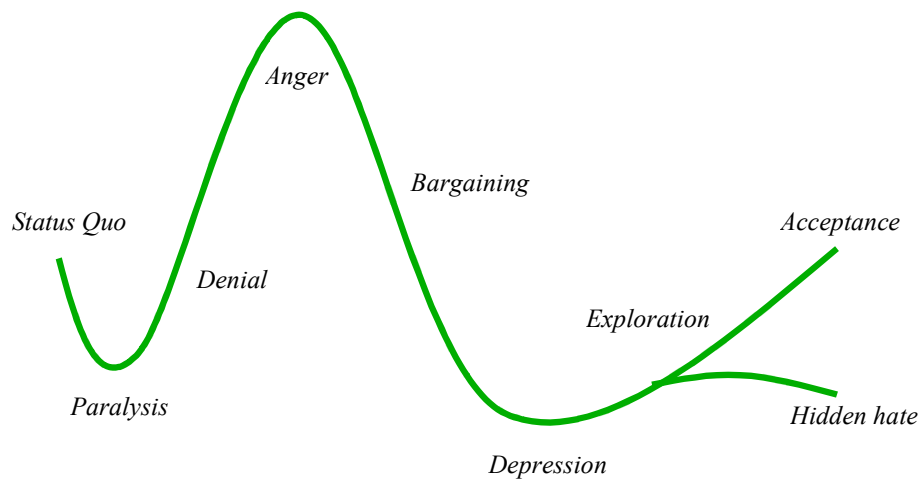


Figure 1: A common model for phases of resistance

When people share interests, they sometimes stick together in groups. Introducing changes may now either be far easier, or alternatively, quite impossible due to group resistance. Politics is the art of finding out what's possible to change despite different group interests. This is a tough game, sometimes with a lot of dirty tricks. Machiavelli's ideas of real-politics often applies here [The Software Prince].

Organizations with well-established hierarchies and strong management are efficient stabilizers of *Status-Quo*. It takes more than strong leadership to change things in such an environment. Visionary leaders scare people, empty managers, too.

*The main dangers in this life are the people who want to change everything
– or nothing. [Lady Astor]*

There is another kind of resistance with deeper roots than just momentary insecurity. That's the kind of negative resistance based on bad experiences. A history of mistreatment, creates an atmosphere of disrespect.

The attitude barometer in Figure 2 is a hint to understanding the background of this resistance. People may find themselves pressed through the wall into a negative and vicious cycle of low energy. And they are not always to blame. Disrespecting people is a psychological death-threat.

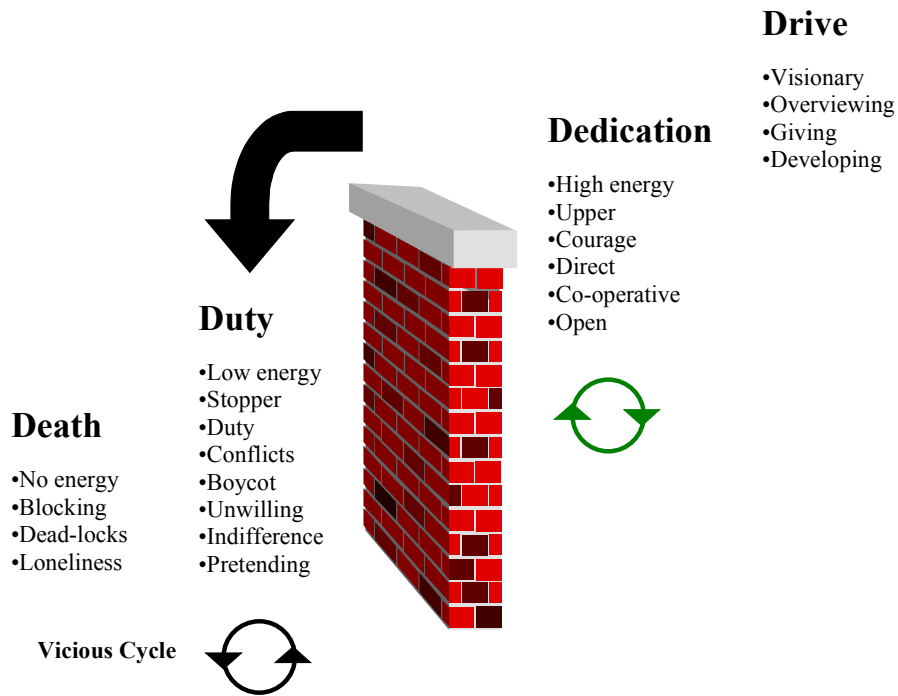


Figure 2: An attitude barometer.

Such a vicious cycle is obviously not a easy environment for initiating changes. Kelly [The Complexity Advantages] describes in details how the cycle may work:

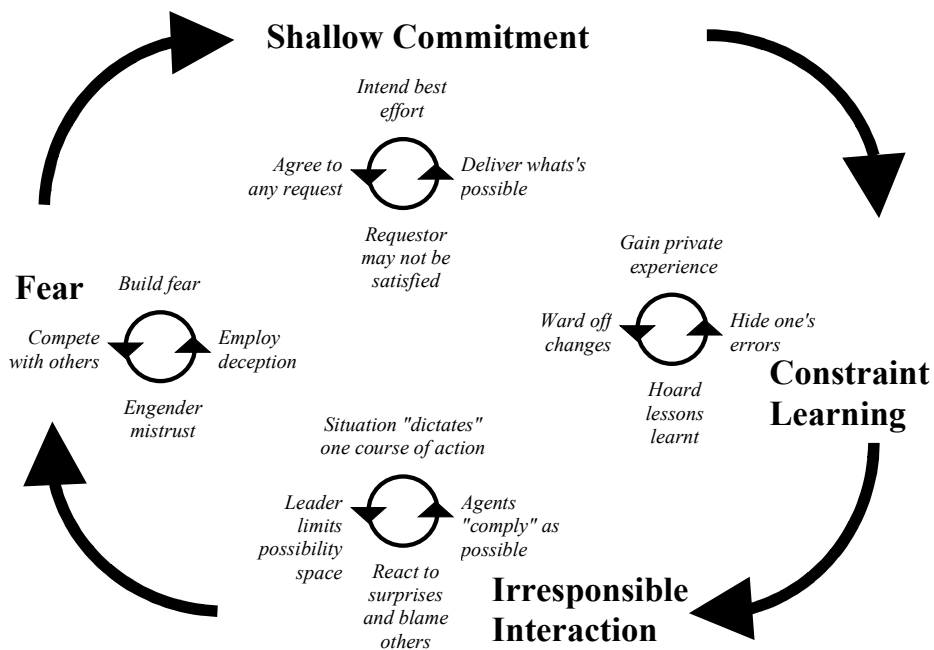


Figure 3: Vicious Cycle [The Complexity Advantage]

To sum up there seem to be two major categories of resistance:

- Positive resistance (reaction to uncertainty, unknown momentary event)
- Negative resistance (reaction to frustration, known history of events)

Dealing with resistance

How can we deal with resistance? First of all, we need to convince ourselves, that the changes really are improvements in the long run. This is not trivial. In a paradigm shift, it usually takes an initial period before the benefits of the new paradigm surpass the old.

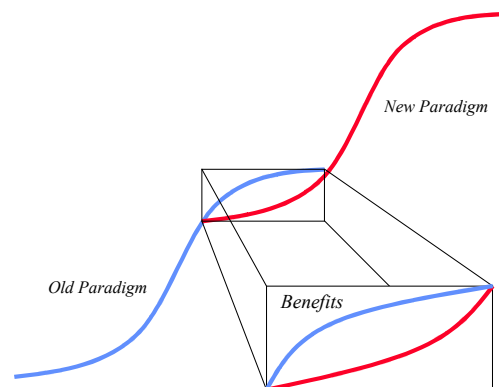


Figure 4: Paradigm shift [Leading People]

Secondly, we need to consider the starting point: Are we to expect a lot of negative resistance? If so, we need to deal with the cause of that first.

Now, the best advice I ever got on how to make changes is the following:

- Go *with* the people – not *against*.

Who would change the course of a Supertanker by an up-front collision? Respect people - use *tangential forces*!



Figure 5: Use tangential force to lead!

The *Supertanker trick* is fundamental - I am still working on it! Examples:

Against: You don't spend enough time on this!

With: It's hard to find time for this when there are so many other things to do. Perhaps we could...

or

Against: Here is the solution!

With: There is no silver bullet to this problem. The second best thing to do is perhaps...

The starting must be your common values and shared experiences. Weinberg suggests asking: "What are the things we want to leave unchanged?" This simple question may very well set the stage for a much more constructive dialog.

Another trick is the *The Wife trick*: Let the husband into believing that *he* got the idea! Inspire people to reinvent ideas. You got to admit it: Your trust your own ideas much more. After all, your own judgement is the most important to you - it's your life.

A variant is *The Jesus trick*: Talk abstract, apparently beside the point. When people get the point (after three weeks...) the point is made by themselves, inside their brains. That's much stronger than a point spelled out in a discussion.

Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish [How to talk so kids will listen & Listen so kids will talk] write about bringing-up children, but the list of advises is nevertheless useful:

When kids feel right, they'll behave right: Accept their feelings. Listen. Say it with one word. Avoid: Blaming and accusing, name-calling, threats, commands, lecturing and moralizing, warnings, martyrdom statements, comparison, sarcasm, and prophecy (Do what I say, or we are all doomed!).

If there is anything that we wish to change in the child, we should first examine it and see whether it is not something that could better be changed in ourselves. [Carl Jung]

The insecurity aspect of resistance should be counter-measured with knowledge - lots of knowledge. This obviously improves the risk analysis. But it's worth noting that one never knows whether an advise is good before it's actually tried. Then again, the most successful counselors seem to have passed the *sound-barrier* of trust. By mere personal authority they can get very far. They are the wizards, the wise men from China, the men in white coats. But beware: They might also be a Mr. Chance! Nevertheless, Weinberg openly states the consultants trick: Make sure your salary is so high that they'll listen to you!

Some people believe that the arguments for changing should rest on hard facts and numbers. They think that this is a more *mature* approach since numbers are harder to argue with. But by addressing the brain only, the risk is that the facts are perceived as a hammer in the head, forgetting the fundamental thing that safety and respect are feelings belonging to the heart. Facts are typically used in a conflict, not in a consensus situation. When numbers are used, it often a signal that people fundamentally disagree. Furthermore, few people want to be reduced to a spreadsheet cell.

Working with software improvements for some years now, I recommend changing *inside-out* and *bottom-up* [Bottom-up Process Improvement Tricks]. Inside-out because I respect and value people's own judgement, and bottom-up because people's commitment is a much better basis for dealing with all the risks.

Start with establishing a common understanding of the problems as an input to the risk analysis. Inform about possible solutions, and let then the people do the mapping between problems and solutions proposing the changes themselves.

Helping

I realize that this paper isn't saying much new about resisting change. The way people behave hasn't really changed. It's pretty much the same old story.

I would like to end with the words of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard [Fragments of a forthright Message]. If you can read this without getting red ears, you have come far in helping others to change:

About Helping

*When one indeed wishes to lead
a person to a certain place,
one must first of all figure out
where the person is at,
and start there.*

*This is the secret in all art of helping.
Anyone who can't do this
is conceited in thinking
he can be of help to others.*

*To truly help someone,
I must understand more than he,
but first of all understand,
what he understands.
If I don't, my 'more-understanding'
won't help him at all.*

*Should I still insist on my 'more-understanding',
then it's because I'm vain or proud,
and in essence wants to be admired by him.*

*But all genuine help begins with humility:
The helper must first humble himself
before the one he wants to help and by that,
understand that to help is not about being domineering,
but being the most patient,
that to help is willingness up till then
to accept being in the wrong in not understanding,
what the other understands.*

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