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Resistance Has Gotten a Bad Name



Frances was asked to address the Thai Stock Exchange in Bangkok this October on Knowledge Management.

Managers often say during a big change, “Oh s/he’s just resisting,” as if no more need be said. Underlying is the assumption people resist simply because they shy away from anything new. Sometimes that’s true. But like all truisms, only partly.

First, no matter how correct the new future is, unless your predecessors were total boobs, there is always something to recommend the old way. Resistance often arises when employees fear those parts of the ‘old way’ they associate with good service, quality, or pride in work are being jeopardized. Resistance is natural if they think you’re jettisoning values they care about in a headlong march into the future. Naturally, I know you are not. But while you may not be jettisoning them, truthfully, you are probably changing them. Or at least changing their importance. If employees must consult stakeholders before a decision previously theirs to take, they may see this as devaluing their expertise. If you drive towards greater efficiency, they may see it jeopardizing quality.

Change is about reordering values. You may need to for the organization’s good, but don’t dismiss the resulting resistance. People don’t adopt a change that violates their values. You wouldn’t either.

Frances

Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them.

— Laurence J. Peter: quoted by Dr. Jeff Conklin of the CogNexus Institute in *Wicked Problems and Fragmentation*

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