



Behavioral Resistance to Process Change

A Behavioral Perspective from Organizational Behavior Management

Nearly every organization encounters the same phenomenon. A new work process is carefully designed, thoroughly tested, and comprehensively documented. A project team is established; communication plans and implementation schedules are drawn up. Yet the rollout proves to be difficult. Employees continue to rely on old ways of working, procedures are only partially followed, and the expected improvements and benefits fail to materialize. We tend to conclude that "*people naturally resist change.*"

But is that really true?

From the perspective of behavioral science and Organizational Behavior Management (OBM), resistance is not a personality trait. It mostly is observable behavior that occurs under specific conditions. This makes resistance not only easier to understand, but also far easier to address.

What resistance often looks like

When a new process is introduced, resistance rarely appears as open opposition. More often, it manifests itself through subtle behaviors and comments such as:

- "Everything is still unclear."
- "I was never informed that this decision had been made."
- "We haven't received any instructions yet."
- "The system isn't working properly."
- "Let's wait and see."
- "Every department is doing something different. Why not start with them!?"
- "I don't have time for this right now."
- "We tried this five years ago."

Sometimes these comments are perfectly legitimate. In many cases they are even correct. Yet remarkably, these responses often continue, even after communication has improved and documentation has been made available. Clearly, there is something more going on, than simply a lack of information.



Traditional explanations often fall short

Many change initiatives focus heavily on communication. Organizations organize presentations, send newsletters, conduct workshops, and publish FAQ documents. Yet employee behavior often changes very little.

The reason for this is pretty straightforward: information only changes behavior to a limited extent.

People only change their behavior when they:

- know what is expected of them;
- can perform the desired behavior;
- and have sufficient reason to act.

This is precisely where Organizational Behavior Management offers a practical and scientifically grounded framework and approach.

Behavior is the central focus

OBM is rooted in behavioral science and focuses primarily on observable behavior, rather than attitudes, motivation, personality, or organizational culture.

A process is best seen as a logical, goal-oriented sequence of observable actions, where the output of step 1 serves as input for step 2; the output of step 2 serves as input for step 3 and so on and so forth.

From an OBM point of view, a process is seen as a sequence of *performances*. A performance is defined as: 'specific behavior producing specific results within a specific context'. Every step in a process requires specific behavior from employees, to produce a specific result. That result then is passed downstream.

When that specific behavior *does not occur*, the process itself cannot function as intended. From an OBM perspective, the key question is therefore not:
"Why don't people want to change?"

Instead, it becomes:

"What environmental conditions make the desired behavior more or less likely to occur?"

The answer can be found in the well-known ABC Model.

The ABC Model

According to the ABC Model, behavior is influenced by two major factors: Antecedents and Consequences.

The ABC Model consists of:

- Antecedents (A): events or conditions that occur before behavior and trigger or prompt a behavior;
- Behavior (B): the observable action itself;
- Consequences (C): what happens after the behavior occurred. Consequences determine whether behaviors will occur more or less frequently in the future.

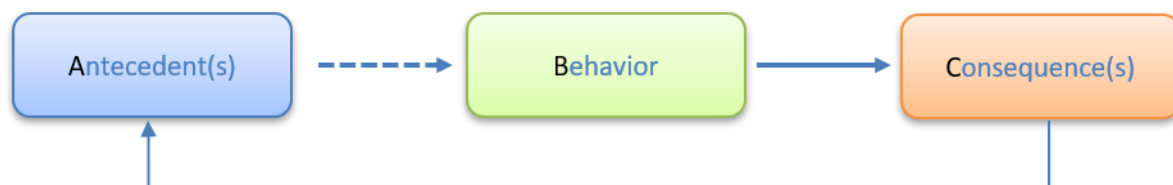


Figure 1: ABC Model

A new work instruction, training session, or written procedure are examples of *Antecedents*. Feedback, recognition, goal attainment, reduced workload, appreciation, or criticism are examples of *Consequences*.

Although the distinction appears simple, it has major implications for how organizations should approach resistance.

Two Types of Resistance

When dealing with process implementations, it is useful to distinguish between two fundamentally different situations, which both signal resistance:

- Can't Do – something blocks performance before it can occur;
- Won't Do – the performer, for some reason, does not want to perform.

Although both may appear as resistance, they require completely different interventions.

Can't Do: Employees Are Unable to Perform the Desired Behavior

In a *can't do situation*, something necessary is missing on the antecedent side of behavior.



Employees may lack:

- knowledge;
- skills;
- clear instructions;
- necessary tools;
- appropriate authority;

An employee who says: "*I don't really know how this works.*" may be completely correct. Likewise, comments such as: "*I've never seen that procedure.*" or "*The system doesn't support this process.*" may indicate an antecedent problem.

The desired behavior simply cannot yet be performed. In this situation, additional pressure or accountability discussions are unlikely to help. The necessary conditions must first be established. This is a leadership task: enable the performers.

Won't Do: Employees Choose Different Behavior

A *won't do situation* is fundamentally different. Here, employees possess the necessary knowledge, skills and tools, but consciously and intentionally choose another behavior.

Usually this happens because the *existing consequences* following the old behavior are more attractive than *those consequences associated with the new behavior*.

For example:

- The old procedure takes less time for the performer;
- Colleagues also continue to use the old way of working and get away with that;
- Deviating from the new process has no negative consequences for the performer;
- Following the new process initially produces no visible benefit for the performer.

From the employee's perspective, the performer, this behavior is in most cases entirely rational. People naturally repeat behaviors that produce rewarding consequences for them. Additionally, people avoid behaviors that produce undesirable consequences for them. Behaviors that require effort without providing meaningful benefits for the performer are also naturally avoided.

Why Communication Alone Is Not Enough

Many organizations respond to resistance by increasing communication efforts.

- Another newsletter;
- Another presentation, explaining the why, what, who, when, how;
- Another workshop;
- Another intranet announcement.



This may help when dealing with a *can't do situation*, but it has very little impact when the underlying issue is a *won't do situation*.

Someone who fully understands what needs to be done but experiences no positive consequence for doing it is unlikely to change their behavior. Ultimately, behavior is governed by its consequences.

Analyzing resistance using the ABC Model

When resistance emerges during a process implementation, organizations should first conduct a so-called '*ABC Analysis*'. This technique identifies Antecedents and Consequences associated with a specific Behavior. This analysis helps understanding the context in which the performance occurs.

The first question should be: can employees perform the desired behavior?

If the answer is 'no', the solution lies on the antecedent side of the ABC Model. People may require:

- better instructions;
- additional training;
- clearer process documentation;
- improved tools;
- clear responsibilities and formal authorization.

Only after these conditions have been established can employees reasonably be expected to demonstrate the behavior.

The second question then becomes: do employees want to demonstrate the desired behavior?

If knowledge and skills are present, attention shifts toward consequences following the desired behavior. Desired behavior in this case is: performing the activities required by the process.

Ask yourself:

- What rewards does the old behavior provide?
- What benefits does the new behavior offer?
- What feedback do our employees receive?
- What feedback is needed in which frequency?
- Is desired behavior recognized, reinforced, and appreciated?

TIP: First Eliminate Can't Do, Then Eliminate Won't Do



OBM therefore provides a logical sequence for managing resistance.

Step 1: Address Can't Do Factors

Ensure that employees:

- understand what is expected of them;
- possess the required knowledge;
- are able to practice and learn;
- have access to appropriate tools;
- can use the necessary systems;
- have enough time for the task and the correct level of authority to move forward;
- have clear work instructions.

Only when these conditions are met can the behavior realistically be expected.

Step 2: Address Won't Do Factors

Next, design the work environment so that desired behavior becomes more attractive than problem behavior. This can be achieved by:

- organizing and providing immediate positive feedback for a job well done;
- making successes visible;
- sharing performance results;
- encouraging active coaching by supervisors;
- recognizing and affirming desired behaviors;
- measuring performance, followed by celebrating progress and success;
- and responding consistently to deviations from the process.

At this stage, the focus shifts from communication toward behavioral reinforcement.

Process Management ultimately is Behavior Management

Many organizations invest significant effort in documenting processes.

- Flowcharts are created;
- Swimlane diagrams are designed;
- RACI matrices are developed.

However, processes do not execute themselves.

Every process step is carried out either by automated systems or by human behavior.

For every non-automated activity, a simple principle applies:

Process performance = human behavior + enabling conditions + consequences.



If behavior does not change, the process itself will not change.

This is precisely why OBM provides such a powerful complement to traditional process management.

From Resistance to Behavioral Design

Perhaps it is time to view resistance differently. Not as something that exists within people, but as a logical outcome of the environment in which they work.

- If employees cannot perform the desired behavior, improve the antecedents.
- If employees will not perform the desired behavior, redesign the consequences.

This perspective transforms resistance from an abstract psychological concept into something that can be analyzed and systematically influenced.

Conclusion

Successful process implementation depends far less on communication campaigns than many organizations assume. Employees certainly need to understand what is changing, but information alone rarely produces sustainable behavioral change.

Organizational Behavior Management (OBM) offers a practical framework for systematically analyzing and understanding resistance. The ABC Model demonstrates that observable resistance behavior often reflects either a can't do situation or a won't do situation.

The most effective sequence is therefore straightforward:

- First eliminate all can't do factors by ensuring that antecedents are in place through clear instructions, training, tools, authority, and well-designed processes.
- Then eliminate won't do factors by creating positive and immediate consequences for desired behavior, making it more likely that the new behavior will be repeated.

From this behavioral perspective, process implementation becomes more than introducing a new way of working. It becomes the deliberate design of behavior that drives organizational performance.

This is where process management and Organizational Behavior Management truly reinforce one another: a process is ultimately a chain of performances, and every non-automated performance is fundamentally human behavior. By understanding and influencing that behavior systematically, organizations can reduce resistance while significantly increasing the likelihood of successful and sustainable process improvement.



Figure 2: Summary