

Learnings from Practice 18: Surveying Resistance

How can you surface resistance to change in an authentic and experiential way?

The Request. The Training and Safety Manager of a State Department of Forestry asked for help in designing a half-day component of a conference that heralded the implementation of a new Geographical Information System (GIS). The conference sponsor, a GIS staff expert who reported to the Department Director wanted to help all 280 staff that collected geographical data (e.g., data on forests, wildlife, terrain, soil chemistry, recreation, etc.) to buy-into using a new centralized system.

Larger Context. Database management was occurring before anyone anticipated that a system-wide solution was needed. The department resource staff had always collected all sorts of data on the forest land that they managed. With the advent of desktop computing, measures and coding was being developed uniquely by different individuals throughout the state. For example, some staff were recording whole timber volumes, while others were recording the diameter at breast height (DBH). Storage was also varied with paper files, photos, mylar maps, digital databases and microfiche. Non-standard codes and the variety of storage formats create barriers to efficient information exchange. So, while the current system may have worked for individuals, with matrixed teams, there were inconsistencies in the data that needed to be resolved, translations were required to a common format and standards needed to be reconfigured. Sometimes, the same data was being collected by different staff. Multiple reports for different geographical levels (forest stand, drainage area, ecosystem) required an extended lag time to update the data. Official inventories were not current and records were lost as individual staff left the department. The department was looking to create a set of consistent and common standards, definitions and formats. They wanted a GIS system in which the data could be entered once, updated as needed and used in different ways, by different people and by different applications, at different levels of analysis.

Consulting Intervention. We decide on a feedback and experimental approach to help staff discuss the system's resistance to change and allow them, metaphorically, to experience the difference between the current and future systems. A self-assessment reaction sheet based on a theoretical definition of resistance was used to collect individual "resistance scores." These were tallied across all participants and used as a basis for small group discussions about the current state of change the system was experiencing. The following items served as anchor points on a 7-point differential scale.

1. I have enough (very little) time to deal with the change to the new system.
2. I anticipate a number of (few, if any) negative results because of the new system.
3. I have a lot of (few) questions about the details of the new system.
4. I feel reluctant (comfortable) adopting the new system.
5. The new system is a practical (theoretical) and (not) a "real world" alternative.
6. I'm looking forward to (hesitant about) the possible work changes that the new system might create.

Last Line. One way to help develop system-wide understanding of large scale change and the natural resistance that accompanies it, is to use an assessment and feedback process.

Commentary: This is typical action research that is in accordance with a value for inquiry, while realizing that any conclusions drawn are socially constructed by the organizational members. We have used this process many times especially with data-oriented, technical professionals. There are several phone apps (e.g., VoxVote) available to create instantaneous results that can be presented to the whole system.