Job Redesign: Appreciating Resistance
By Steven L. Dawson

Introduction
The National Fund’s network is widely respected for our direct engagement of employers. That reputation has been built upon the success of network sites delivering high-quality training and career development services to thousands of employers across the country.

Recently, given the unprecedented tightening of our nation’s labor market, many employers have struggled to find and keep good workers. In response, many National Fund network sites are now broadening their strategies to include helping employers redesign their frontline jobs. The intent of offering job redesign services is to help employers remain competitive within the labor market and attain a competitive advantage in securing and serving their customers.

In helping workforce practitioners guide the change process with employer partners, the National Fund has learned that “job-quality” or “job-redesign” strategies require that sites achieve an even deeper and more sophisticated engagement with their employer partners. While still offering access to well-trained workers as a core and valuable service, network sites must now also “get inside the business” in order to be of value in helping employers redesign competitively attractive jobs.

Understandably, this is a challenging role for workforce practitioners: we are helping employers to change their internal structures, behaviors, even cultures. No one likes to change—and we like being urged to change even less.

Just picture an outside consultant coming into your office and saying that he or she is there to “help your organization adapt to new realities.” Even if you are predisposed to agree, who that consultant is and how that consultant acts—that is, what questions they ask, their tone, even how they are dressed—will impact how accepting you will be of their message. Most importantly, you will want to know whether that consultant has ever “sat in your chair”—that is, had to make the same hard decisions you must make every day—in order to assess their credibility.

Finally, the impetus for this framework derives from what National Fund staff have often noticed as perhaps an over-reliance on exclusively logical, rational arguments to employers—such as the “ROI” on the cost of staff turnover. While marshalling such “bottom-line” arguments is always helpful, we have found that they are rarely sufficient to convince a cautious employer. Many other forces are at work—some rational; some non-rational—and all quite understandable.
We present the following “Resistance Levels” as one way to expand our understanding of what those forces might be, how to appreciate them in a non-judgmental way, and options to respond.

**Purpose**
The National Fund’s Resistance Levels is designed for workforce practitioners implementing “Job Quality / Job Redesign” strategies within our collaborative network. It is intended to help practitioners understand the current situation that employers face (e.g., high turnover, absenteeism, poor performance) and then—over time, as the relationship develops—help the practitioner and the employer jointly define the desired outcome (e.g., employer of choice, high performance, competitive advantage):

Yet in helping any employer move from **Point A** to **Point B**…

![A → B](image)

…the practitioner will most always encounter a degree of “resistance”:

![A ↔ Ω → B](image)

The purpose of this construct is to help the practitioner understand the various types of employer resistance—initially when persuading, and then when implementing—and how those instances might be addressed.

![A ↔ Ω → B](image)

We emphasize that the key to understanding and responding to employer resistance is genuine curiosity and deep listening—from the very beginning of, and throughout, the relationship. It is this combination of true curiosity and careful listening that helps to build a personal connection with the employer and their employees. And this in turn helps to establish a shared definition of both the problem to be solved, and the range of possible solutions available.

Finally, asking thoughtful questions demonstrates the commitment that the practitioner has to the success of the business, and begins to assure the employer of the practitioner’s competence and general business knowledge. Asking about the employer’s day-to-day role in the company, and even non-intrusive questions about their family, will further help to reduce the degree of resistance from the very start.

**Note on Language**
We chose the term “resistance,” rather than “obstacle,” because an obstacle just stands there and gets in the way. Resistance is dynamic: it can shift, increase or decrease—and push back.
Most importantly, “resistance” is not intended here as a judgmental term. Most instances of employer resistance are entirely reasonable. It is therefore essential for the practitioner to approach each instance of resistance with curiosity, not judgment, in order to understand and address it effectively.

Context

The U.S. labor market is the tightest in a generation. Employers in nearly every region of the country, and in nearly every industry, complain that they can’t find good workers—and can’t keep the ones they have. In a recent MetLife/ U.S. Chamber of Commerce Small Business’ Index survey (Q4 2018), 67% of employers reported “difficulty finding candidates with the skills they need.”

…And yet, the same survey noted that: “(although) the majority of businesses looking for new employees are struggling …two in three businesses that searched for talent in 2018 say they won’t try a different strategy in 2019.” [Emphasis added]

So, even what may seem to workforce practitioners as blazingly obvious—that employers should be knocking down our doors to “try a different strategy”—does not appear at all blazingly obvious to most small businesses.

Our Resistance Levels construct is intended to help practitioners understand why so many businesses may appear resistant to new strategies—and how we might respond.

Why Resist?

When we, as practitioners, work with any employer to consider a new workforce strategy, we must always keep three realities in mind:

- **First, do not “rush to solution.”** From the beginning, it is essential to understand how the employer understands and defines their situation. The more that you and the employer come to share agreement on the problems to be solved—and the relative degree of their importance—the less likely the employer will later resist tailored solutions.

- **Much is at stake.** An employer’s business represents not only a crucially important source of their financial livelihood, it also represents their prestige among colleagues, sense of success, even identity. In addition, many employers care deeply about their employees and the role that the business plays in their community; they feel great responsibility to not let them down. Contemplating any change within a business, even when the employer is experiencing severe workforce challenges, is never trivial.

- **We offer no guarantee.** Although we may be quite confident that the strategies that we and the company might shape together will be beneficial, we can never

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1 The Small Business Administration defines a small business as having 500 or fewer employees.
be absolutely sure. We are, in fact, urging the employer to take a risk—one that will likely have much greater consequence for the employer than for ourselves.

Of course, employers are not two-dimensional. They vary in how open they are to consider, and then act upon, change of any sort. In 1962, E.M. Rogers created the “Diffusion of Innovation” theory,\(^2\) acknowledging that all people fall somewhere along a bell curve of openness to change. He characterized five types of individuals: Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, and Laggards. Importantly, each category requires a different approach for change management. Over time, understanding which innovator “category” your employer partner falls within will help you craft your strategy accordingly.

Finally, working with an employer to consider a change in strategy, when so much is at stake, introduces uncertainty—and it is in reaction to uncertainty that resistance is a natural, even healthy, response. Change is always challenging, for all of us.

**Who is in the Room?**

When you begin to engage a business, the first question you should always ask yourself is, “Am I talking to the right person?” Too often, a job redesign initiative fails because the individuals we are engaging do not have either the formal authority or informal power to create change.

This is particularly true when working with a larger company having multiple departments. For example, while it may be essential to engage the HR Manager, at least at some point in the process. However, HR typically has no influence over Operations, which is where job redesign must occur. And depending on the company, neither HR nor Operations may have any influence over Business Strategy, which is where the core understanding of “investing in employees as a competitive advantage” must reside.

Of course, that is why practitioners are typically exhorted to “start with the CEO,” or at least “with the C-Suite.” However, a commitment at the senior level alone does not necessarily guarantee success, particularly as the initiative proceeds from initial agreement into implementation. Many major workforce projects assembled senior leadership around the decision-making table—all of whom pledged allegiance to the strategy—only to have the effort falter because resistance occurred, but was not addressed, lower down the chain of command.

The lesson is that you as a practitioner must constantly be questioning whether you are engaging the *right* decision-makers at the *right* time—because power, and therefore sources of resistance, will shift as the initiative moves through persuasion into implementation.

\(^2\) To explore these categories and consider appropriate change strategies, see: http://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/MPH-Mockup escalations/BehavioralChangeTheories/BehavioralChangeTheories4.html
Three Levels of Resistance

The remainder of this discussion is divided in two parts: The first addresses resistance during the initial persuasion phase; the second during the later implementation phase.

Part One: Resistance During Persuasion

Behavioral economists tell us that uncertainty triggers a range of “fast-thinking” responses in our brains—presumptions, short-cuts, biases. These are the “non-rational” reactions that have evolved over time as (quite essential) human survival mechanisms. In comparison, “slow-thinking” responses are “rational” reactions that require time—and information—to process.

Picture yourself walking into the office of an unfamiliar employer—let’s say, based on the odds in today’s American business community, an older man in his late 50s—to discuss his workforce strategy. Over the course of the meeting, you will likely be greeted at three levels of resistance:

Level I: “I’m not sure I understand your message”  
Level II: “I’m not sure I like your message.”  
Level III: “I’m not sure I like/trust you.”

Note that the above is listed in a “logical” sequence of reactions:

- Level I: You introduce your message—about the possible need for change in the company’s workforce practices
- Level II: Based on that information, the employer decides whether or not to like your message
- Level III: Based at least in part on whether or not he likes your message, the employer decides how much to like/trust you.

Yet, reality unfolds in reverse order: Level III, and even Level II, are likely to trigger instantaneous “fast-thinking” reactions, whereas Level I requires “slow-thinking” analysis. The higher the stakes for the employer, the greater the likelihood that fast-thinking reactions will, at least initially, dominate slow-thinking responses:

Level III: “I’m not sure I like/trust you.” As you walk into the room, the employer will make instantaneous judgments about you—within as much as seven seconds, and as little as 1/10th of a second. In behavioral economic terms, he will assess whether you are of the same “tribe”—or at the very least, a person capable of understanding what it is like to run/manage a similar business. Your age, your dress, your tone, the language you use—and depending on the employer, perhaps even your gender or the color of your skin—contribute to an initial, instantaneous reaction.

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3 For a behavioral economics lens on workforce development, see Joe Baumann’s Behavioral Economics for Workforce Professionals, National Fund for Workforce Solutions.

4 This three-part frame is adapted from the writings of organizational specialist Rick Maurer. See: https://www.rickmaurer.com/home/.

5 See You And Your Business Have 7 Seconds To Make A First Impression, Forbes Magazine, 19 June 2018.
### Job Redesign - Resistance Levels

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESISTANCE</th>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>RESPONSE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I'm not sure I... UNDERSTAND YOUR MESSAGE</td>
<td>This is the “rational” level of resistance.</td>
<td>This level can be addressed by providing clear, simple, relevant information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm not sure I... LIKE YOUR MESSAGE</td>
<td>This level is often a wide mixture of both “rational” and “non-rational” reactions and concerns</td>
<td>No amount of additional information about your message is likely to address these reactions. Instead, you must understand and respond to the employer’s unique concerns. Some of those concerns may be specific to your message, others may relate to the broader context - e.g., competing priorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm not sure I... LIKE/TRUST YOU</td>
<td>This is typically an unspoken, instantaneous reaction: “Are you of the same tribe?”</td>
<td>Often, the messenger is the message. While some of this is within your control, much is not. Consider being introduced, or even accompanied, by a trusted colleague of the employer.</td>
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*This three-part frame is adapted from the writings of organizational specialist Rick Maurer, See: [https://www.rickmaurer.com/home/](https://www.rickmaurer.com/home/).

To the extent this initial reaction on the part of the employer is at all negative, or at least uncertain, indeed may be neither fair nor right. It may, however, be a reality. The employer’s judgment of you as messenger will in turn influence his judgment of the value of your message. Therefore, the deeper your prior relationship with the employer is, the less likely you are to meet resistance. If you have no prior relationship, consider being introduced, or even accompanied, by a trusted colleague of the employer.

**Level II: “I’m not sure I like your message.”** It is logical to assume that the employer first must hear and understand your message before determining whether or not he likes it. However, in reality he very likely already has a preconceived idea—a “fast-thinking” presumption—of what you are going to propose. Perhaps because of past experience with other workforce initiatives, or because of what the employer has heard from their colleagues, they may well be starting from a presumption. For example, what you are “selling” might be fine for others, but just not appropriate for their particular business.

Also, initial resistance may not be in specific reaction to your message, but rather to complicating contextual factors. Even if perfectly prepared to accept your arguments for change as “workable in theory,” the employer simply may not consider his workforce challenge to be a high priority—other, more immediate business problems are on the horizon. Or, non-work factors, such as problems at home or a range of
personal tensions, may be crowding out the employer’s ability to consider new ideas—no matter how objectively valuable they might be.

**Level I: “I’m not sure I understand your message.”** Here at last you are entering more rational, logical territory—an area over which you have more direct control. Note, however, that while you are providing your rational presentation, the employer is nonetheless reacting at all three levels simultaneously—and all three levels are interacting and influencing one another.

Which, of course, places the burden on you to be as clear and convincing as possible as quickly as possible. This can explain the relative ineffectiveness of the reliance on ‘cost of turnover’ return-on-investment arguments. Such calculations of turnover costs and saving are not particularly intuitive, are often subjective, and in many cases are difficult to document for any specific business. Unless the employer is already predisposed to like your message, and like you, their fast-thinking reactions will not likely await any vague or convoluted prescriptions.

What is most important to consider from this three-level analysis is that information and rational explanation alone are rarely sufficient to address employer resistance. Of course, the “rule of seven” also applies—that people need to hear an idea at least seven times before they fully understand it. However, if the employer doesn’t like or trust you, or if they believe they understand your message enough to distrust it—then no amount of additional Level III information about your message will make a difference.

Instead, you must also, constantly, address the other levels of resistance—as they are experienced in the mind and heart of the employer.

Finally, it is worth repeating that even though your message presumes the need to consider a change in workforce strategy it is essential that you not approach the employer with pre-conceived “answers.” Rather, your goal should be to understand the employer’s initial perspective as to the nature and extent of the problem. Then and only then can you shape, together, an initial approach. Even at this stage, you don’t want to be designing solutions within the confines of just the “boss’s office.” Instead, you will want to agree with the employer on a process, which—importantly—should engage the workers themselves in the shaping of specific solutions.

**Part Two: Resistance during Implementation**

Having navigated initial discussions with the employer and received approval to begin a job redesign initiative, resistance does not end—it simply shifts to other parties. In many cases, the C-Suite level of employer may offer the least resistance because they may be relatively removed from direct operations, which is where the hard work of actual job redesign occurs. Often, the greatest resistance may manifest lower in the chain of command where any kind of change may threaten middle-management power, weaken union authority, misalign with current financial incentives, or simply disrupt cherished daily routine.
All three levels of resistance previously described are, of course, as relevant to implementation as to initial persuasion. Each new person you encounter during change implementation must also be attuned to the nature of the problem, and participate in the shaping of the solution—since both their “fast-thinking” and “slow-thinking” reactions will similarly be triggered.

During the far more complex implementation stage, it is Level II (“I’m not sure I like your message”) that will offer a nearly endless mix of possible resistances—both rational and non-rational. Below are examples of both types:

*Rational resistance*

…to the suggested initiative *itself*:

**Direct prior experience**: “We tried to address these workforce issues in our department last year, and it didn’t work.”

**Incorrect assumptions**: “You are presuming that we have a just-in-time inventory system here—but we don’t.”

**Structural barriers**: “This part of our operations is governed by a master contract, and the International would never permit any of these types of changes.”

**Misaligned incentives**: “If I were to implement these kinds of redesign ideas in my department, my quarterly bonus would be cut in half.”

**Response**: *Do your homework*. This type of resistance should, to a great extent, be avoidable. You need to know in advance as much as possible about the company you are working with, and therefore what types of changes might be structured appropriately for this particular company.

…not to the suggested initiative, but to the *context*:

**Insufficient expertise**: “I’d love to do this, but no one in my shop has anywhere near the experience to lead this initiative.”

**Changes in staff leadership**: “Unfortunately, the person who would likely champion this project was just re-assigned to another region.”

**Competing priorities**: “I agree that turnover is a big problem, but we’re rebuilding our processing unit now, and we can’t possibly pay attention to anything else.”

**Staff overload**: “I get that our CEO has signed on to this project, but she just has no idea how many other initiatives and problems we’re dealing with right now.”
**Insufficient resources:** “I see how this would be helpful, but I just don’t have the cashflow to implement it.”

**Response: Problem solve.** If your redesign initiative is perceived to be a positive one—but external factors are getting in the way—this is a great opportunity to work with an implementation team to create rational solutions to these rational problems. Throughout the process, the more that people engage in creating their own solutions, the more likely those solutions will be successful. Not all problems may be solvable, and some may simply be a matter of timing, but joint problem-solving between the practitioner and the company’s employees throughout the chain of command can also be an effective way to build trust.

**Non-rational resistance**

*Note: These statements will likely never be spoken out loud:*

**Loss of power:** “I’m the person who makes decisions in this unit—why would I want to let these workers help shape decisions?”

**Fear of making a mistake:** “If this goes wrong, I’ll be blamed—and I’ll also probably have to clean up the mess.”

**Fear of looking foolish:** “If this works, then I’ll be shown up as having been doing the wrong thing all this time.”

**Loss of peer respect:** “None of my colleagues at the Lions Club are doing this. Even if these ideas work, they’ll think I’m putting on airs.”

**Prejudice:** “I don’t think those frontline workers in my department are smart enough to do anything except what they’re told to do.”

**Response: Empathize.** Though this type of resistance may have little or nothing to do with the specifics of the initiative, they are nonetheless very real, very powerful, and totally understandable. This is where approaching each situation without blame or judgment—that is, managing your own emotional reactions—is essential.

**Summary**

Resistance manifests in many forms, interacting and influencing each other at all three levels of resistance. The greater the number of individuals involved in the change process, the more complicated it becomes. While some very logical concerns can and should be addressed by providing more information about your thinking, in many cases simply offering more information will miss the mark.
Instead, workforce practitioners should try to determine, in every case and with every person, the source and type of resistance by always **constantly asking questions**. The more genuinely curious you are, the more you will learn where resistance might lie, and therefore how each instance might best be addressed.

Finally, the more true interest you show in both the business and the person, and the more effectively you work **together** to identify and resolve resistance at Levels I and II, the more you will be valued and trusted—thereby helping to address the most difficult Resistance Level of all: “I'm not sure I like/trust you.”