

# APPRECIATING EMPLOYER RESISTANCE TO JOB DESIGN CHANGES

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## Introduction

The National Fund for Workforce Solutions network is widely respected for its direct relationships with employers. That reputation has been built on the success of regional workforce collaboratives delivering high quality training and career development services to thousands of employers across the country.

Recently, given the unprecedented tightening of the nation's labor market, employers have struggled to find and keep good workers. In response, many National Fund network sites have broadened their strategies to include helping employers redesign their frontline jobs. The intent of these services is to help employers remain competitive within the labor market and gain a competitive business advantage.

In helping workforce practitioners guide the change process with employer partners, the National Fund has learned that *job quality or job redesign* strategies require sites to develop 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 help 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, much less being *urged* to change.

Imagine an outside consultant coming into *your* office to "help your organization adapt to new realities." Even if you are predisposed to agree with the need to adapt, the consultant's personality and behaviors — what questions they ask, their tone, even how they are dressed — impact how accepting you will be of their message. Most importantly, you will evaluate their credibility based on whether that consultant has ever "sat in your chair"—that is, had to make the same hard decisions you must make every day.

Finally, the impetus for this framework derives from what the National Fund has observed as an *over-reliance* on exclusively logical, rational arguments to employers, such as ROI or 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—both rational and nonrational—are at work, and it is important to understand them.

The resistance framework outlined below may expand our understanding of what those forces might be, how to appreciate them in a non-judgmental way, and provide possible ways to respond.

## Purpose

This document is designed for workforce practitioners in the National Fund network who are implementing job quality or job redesign strategies. 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):

In helping any employer move from Point A to Point B...



...the practitioner will almost always encounter a degree of resistance:



This document will help the practitioner understand the various types of employer resistance—initially when *persuading*, and then when *implementing*—and how those instances of resistance might be addressed.



The key to understanding and responding to employer resistance is *genuine curiosity* and *deep listening* from the very beginning of 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 the problem to be solved and the range of available solutions.

Asking thoughtful questions demonstrates the practitioner's commitment to the success of the business as well as their competence and general business knowledge. Inquiring about the employer's day-to-day role in the company, and even posing appropriate questions about their personal life (children, etc.), will further reduce the degree of resistance from the start.

## Note on Language

We have chosen 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.

"Resistance" is *not* intended 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.

However, the same survey noted that although the majority of small businesses are struggling to find new employees, "two in three businesses that searched for talent in 2018 say **they won't try a different strategy in 2019**" [emphasis added].

So what may seem blazingly obvious to workforce practitioners—that employers should be knocking down our doors to "try a different strategy"—does not appear at all obvious to most small businesses.<sup>1</sup>

## Why Resist?

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

- **You rushed to a solution.** It is essential to understand how the employer understands and defines their situation. The more you and the employer agree on the problems to be solved, and the relative degree of their importance, the less likely it is that the employer will resist tailored solutions later.

- **Much is at stake.** An employer's business represents not only their financial livelihood, it also represents their prestige among colleagues, sense of success, and even identity. In addition, many employers care deeply about their employees and the role their business plays in the community—they feel great responsibility to not let them down. Contemplating any business change, even when the employer is experiencing severe workforce challenges, is never trivial.
- **There is no guarantee.** Even when we are confident that our strategies will be beneficial, we can never be absolutely sure. We are, in effect, urging the employer to take a risk—one that will likely have much greater consequence for the employer than for us.

Of course, employers are not all the same. There is some variation in how they approach and respond to change. Fifty years ago, sociologist E.M. Rogers created the diffusion of innovation theory,<sup>2</sup> which says 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. Each type requires a different approach for change management. Over time, understanding which category your employer partner falls within will help you craft an appropriate strategy.

Working with an employer to consider a change in strategy, and its inherent risk, introduces uncertainty. Resistance is a natural, even healthy, response to uncertainty. Change is challenging for all of us.

## Who's in the Room?

When you begin to engage a business, the first question you should ask yourself is, "Am I talking to the right person?" Too often, a job redesign initiative fails because the people we are talking to don't have the formal authority to create change.

This is particularly true when working with a larger company with multiple departments. For example, it is often necessary to engage human resources at some point in the process, but 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.

That is why practitioners are typically encouraged to start with the CEO; however, a commitment at the executive level does not always guarantee success, especially at the implementation stage. There are plenty of examples of workforce projects launched with senior leaders at the table—all of whom pledged allegiance to the project—only to have them falter when resistance occurred farther down the chain of command.

<sup>1</sup>MetLife, & U.S. Chamber of Commerce. (2019). *Small Business Index: The Voices of Small Business Owners | Q4 2018*. U.S. Chamber of Commerce. [https://www.uschamber.com/sbindex/pdf/sbi\\_reports/SBI\\_2018\\_Q4.pdf](https://www.uschamber.com/sbindex/pdf/sbi_reports/SBI_2018_Q4.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>Behavioral Change Models. <http://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/ottt/MPH-Modules/SB/BehavioralChangeTheories/BehavioralChangeTheories4.html>

Practitioners must constantly question whether they are engaging the *right* decision-makers at the *right* time. The source of power, and therefore resistance, will shift as the initiative moves from persuasion into implementation.

## 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.

### Resistance During Persuasion

Behavioral economists tell us that uncertainty triggers a range of “fast-thinking” responses in our brains—presumptions, short-cuts, and biases.<sup>3</sup> These nonrational reactions 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.

Imagine walking into the office of an unfamiliar employer to discuss workforce strategy. Over the course of this first meeting, you will likely be greeted with three levels of resistance:<sup>4</sup>

- **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.”

These can be presented as a “logical” sequence of reactions:

- **Level I:** The employer listens to your message about the possible need for change in the company’s workforce practices.

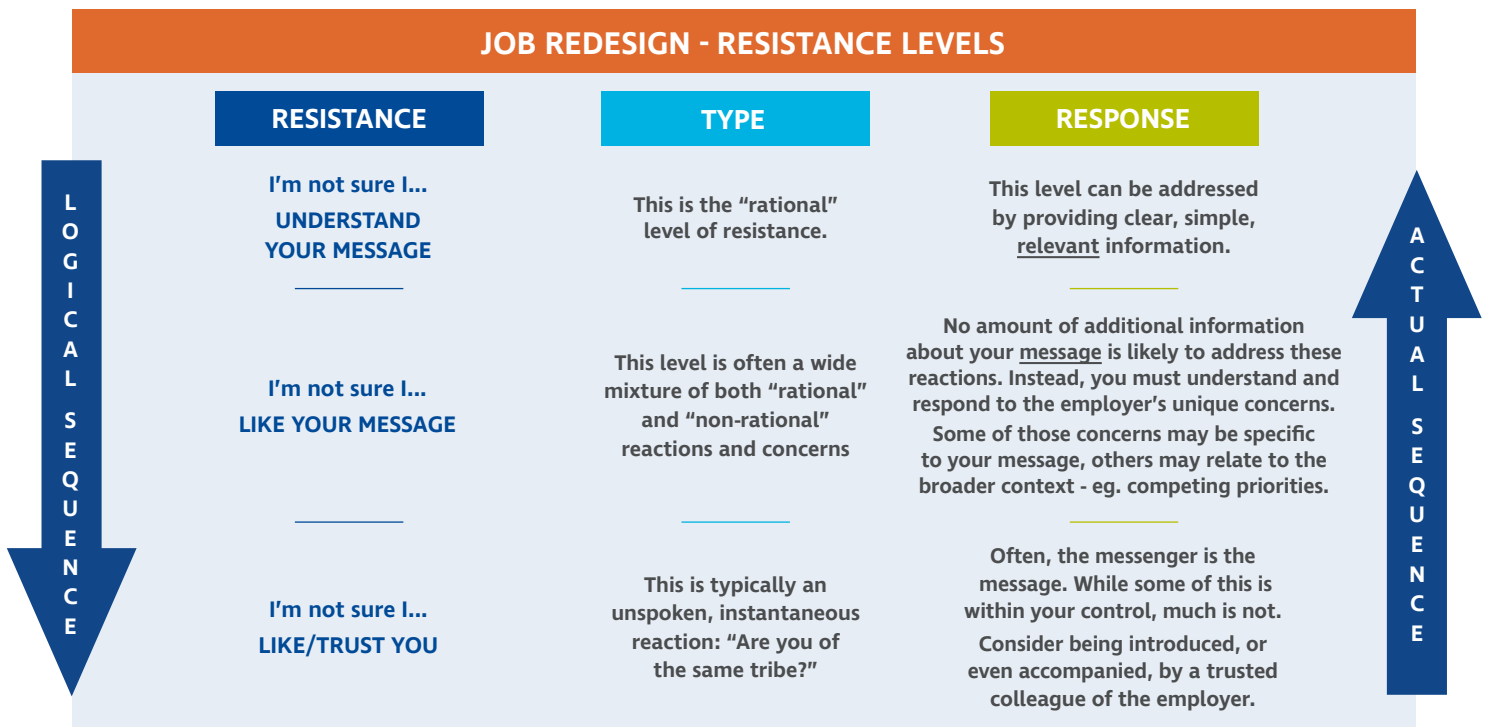
- **Level II:** The employer decides whether or not they like your message.
- **Level III:** Based at least in part on whether or not they like your message, the employer decides how much they like or trust you.

But in reality, these reactions unfold 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 seconds — as little as 1/10<sup>th</sup> of one second.<sup>5</sup> In behavioral economic terms, they 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 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.

This initial reaction may be unfair or inaccurate, but it is a reality. The employer’s judgment of you as messenger will influence their judgment of your message. Therefore, the deeper your prior relationship with the employer, the less likely you are to meet this kind of resistance. If you have no prior relationship, consider being introduced, or even accompanied, by a trusted colleague of the employer.



<sup>3</sup>Baumann, Joe. (2017) Behavioral Economic for Workforce Professionals. National Fund for Workforce Solutions. <https://nationalfund.org/learning-evaluation/publications/behavioral-economics-workforce/>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.rickmaurer.com/home/>.

<sup>5</sup>Gibbons, S. (2018, June 20). You And Your Business Have 7 Seconds To Make A First Impression: Here’s How To Succeed. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/serenitygibbons/2018/06/19/you-have-7-seconds-to-make-a-first-impression-heres-how-to-succeed/>

## 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 they like it. However, in reality they likely have a preconceived idea (a “fast-thinking” presumption) of what you are going to propose. Perhaps this is the result of past experience with other workforce initiatives, or things the employer has heard from their colleagues. For example, they may presume that the idea you’re proposing is fine for others, but not for their particular business.

Initial resistance may not be a reaction to your specific message, but rather, to complicating contextual factors. The employer may be perfectly prepared to accept your idea as workable — in theory — but may not consider their workforce challenge to be a high enough priority or have more immediate business problems on the horizon. Non-work factors, such as problems at home or other personal tensions, may be crowding out their ability to consider new ideas—no matter how objectively valuable they are.

## Level I: “I’m not sure I understand your message.”

At last you are entering more rational territory, one where you have more direct control. But even as you are delivering your well-reasoned presentation, the employer is nevertheless reacting at all three levels simultaneously—and all three levels are interacting and influencing one another. This 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 typical ROI or “cost of turnover” arguments. These calculations are not particularly intuitive, are often subjective, and in many cases are difficult to document. Unless the employer is already predisposed to like your message — and like you — their fast-thinking reactions are unlikely to wait for any vague or abstract business case arguments.

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: 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 address the other levels of resistance as they are experienced in the heart and mind of the employer.

Finally, it is worth repeating that even though you are meeting the employer to propose a change in workforce strategy, it is essential that you not approach them with pre-conceived answers. Rather, your goal is to understand the employer’s initial perspective on the nature and extent of the problem. Only then can you shape, in partnership with the employer, an initial approach. And you don’t want

to be designing solutions with just the boss. Instead, you should agree on a *process*, which—importantly—will engage the workers themselves in the shaping of specific *solutions*.

## Resistance During Implementation

Resistance does not end once you have received approval to begin a job redesign initiative—it simply shifts to other parties. In many cases, the CEO 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. The greatest resistance is often found lower in the chain of command, where any kind of change may be perceived as a threat to middle management, weaken union authority, run counter to current financial incentives, or simply disrupt cherished daily routine.

All three levels of resistance previously described are as relevant in the implementation phase. Each new person you encounter as you implement change must also understand the nature of the problem and participate in the shaping of the solution—since both their “fast-thinking” and “slow-thinking” reactions will be triggered similarly.

During the implementation stage, which is far more complex, it is Level II (“I’m not sure I like your message”) that will present a nearly endless mix of possible resistances—both rational and nonrational.

## Rational resistance

### Resistance to the idea 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, which 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.”

## Best Response: Do Your Homework

This type of resistance should be largely avoidable. You should know in advance as much as possible about the company you are working with, and therefore what types of changes are structured appropriately for this particular company.

## Resistance to the context around the idea

**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 reassigned 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.”

## Nonrational resistance\*

**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 probably be the one to clean up the mess.”

**Fear of looking foolish:** “If this works, then it will look like I’ve 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.”

*\*These statements will likely never be spoken aloud.*

### Best Response: Problem Solve

If your job redesign initiative is viewed as positive, 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. The more that people in the business engage in devising their own solutions, the more likely those solutions will be successful. Not all problems are solvable, and some may simply be a matter of timing, but joint problem-solving between the practitioner and employees throughout the chain of command is an effective way to build trust.

### Best Response: Empathize

Although this type of resistance may have little to 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 and across all three levels, often simultaneously. The greater the number of people involved in the change process, the more complicated the resistance landscape.

Some concerns can and should be addressed with additional information, but in many cases *more information will miss the mark*.

Instead, workforce practitioners should try to determine, in every case and with each person, the source and type of resistance. To do this, always be 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 genuine interest you show in the business and the people in it, and the more effectively you work together to identify and resolve resistance at the first two levels, the more you will be valued and trusted. And that can address the third and most difficult resistance of them all.



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**About National Fund for Workforce Solutions**

The National Fund for Workforce Solutions invests in a dynamic national network of 30+ communities taking a demand-driven, evidence-based approach to workforce development. At the local level, the National Fund's partner organizations contribute resources, test ideas, collect data, and improve public policies and business practices that help all workers succeed and employers have the talent they need to compete. Learn more at [www.NationalFund.org](http://www.NationalFund.org).