



"Why Employees Resist Change and 6 Things a Manager can do About It" by Marcia Meislin

It's Monday morning -- time to diet again. The weekend eating-fest was better than ever. But it's time to buckle down and give up everything you love to eat because the doctor said you should lose weight and watch your cholesterol. So... Why cheat? Why make excuses about not exercising or deviating from the plan, when you know you're only hurting yourself? What would make someone who is so achievement-oriented in other arenas, set a goal and continually disappoint themselves in this process, losing hope about ever being able to change?

The short answer? Simply, it is really difficult to change. Changing ingrained habits and behaviors can be like giving up your identity or your best friend. Sometimes, the more you want it, the more resistant you become, succumbing to an internal battle that feels like good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, one part of me vs. the other part of me.

The diet mentality is a perfect example of how you know what you need to or should do (in this case, what's healthy for you), and yet you resist. Even if you go along with the change for a while, you end up spending more and more of your time thinking about creative ways to break out. Then you justify your resistant behaviors.

Fritz Perls, co-author of *Gestalt Therapy; Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, referred to the dichotomy between the two parts of one's personality as the topdog/underdog conflict. The topdog, a "demander of perfection," claims to always know what's right and good for you, often echoed in the words, "You should..." or, "You better..." Coming across as a self-righteous and judgmental "bully," the topdog's main objective is to get you to change, even if it's out of fear.

The underdog, whose job is to protect feelings from getting trampled on, reacts to this bullying and "holier-than-thou" manner by sabotaging the change effort. Anxious over not measuring up to such high standards, the underdog assumes a victim mentality and creates reasons and excuses for failure and inaction. The underdog perceives every demand to change as a personal attack of one form or another:

- Slap in the face ("You're not good enough!")
- Power play ("You must listen to me because I'm the boss!")
- Threat ("If you don't change, you're going to be in big trouble")
- Potential loss of identity ("I want you to conform and do it just like everyone else!")

Intimidated by the aggressiveness of its counterpart, the underdog finds other means to fight back. It learns how to use every weapon in its arsenal to wiggle out of doing what it doesn't want to do or doesn't feel competent at doing. Some of the underdog's strategies include: denying there's a problem, generating brilliant excuses, sidetracking conversations and well laid-out plans, setting up smokescreens and mirrors, detecting loopholes, and gathering allies to defend its cause.

What happens when there is a live topdog -- someone who has position power or authority over you, like a parent or a boss? Consider the following conversation between a manager, Diane, and her employee, Rick, about a tardiness problem that is affecting Rick's job performance. Rick's underdog knows that he should be on time but can't quite make the commitment to do it. In parentheses are some of the defense mechanisms Rick uses to keep himself from having to take responsibility.

Diane: Rick, I need you to get to work by 9:00am sharp. The business requires it and it's critical for your career.

- Rick: I know but it’s really hard. I have so much going on at home in the mornings that it’s impossible for me to get here on time. (excuses/exaggeration).
- Diane: I know how hard mornings are for you. However, we need you here. Customers start calling at 9:00am and I need you to staff the phones.
- Rick: I was here on time, even early a few days last week. I just can’t do it every day. (rationalization)
- Diane: You’re never going to succeed if you keep on making excuses and coming in late. JUST DO IT!
- Rick: Don’t think I don’t want to; I try but I just can’t! My job is very important to me but I can’t seem to get my act together. I can’t believe how dumb I feel not being able to manage my life. I am so sorry that I’m doing this to you! (self-pity/guilt)
- Diane: Rick, people are complaining that they have to cover your workload as well as their own. Morale is starting to suffer.
- Rick: How come you never talk about what I do well? You always dwell on the negative. My work is always accurate without errors. Why are we focusing on me being a few minutes late? What about everything else? And everyone else? I’m not the only one late to work, you know... (denial/sidetracking)

Ultimately, if Rick wants to keep his job, he will comply with the expected behavior. Yet, you get the sense that he never really buys in to the notion of coming on time. Pushed up against a wall, he can and probably will show up at 9:00am. However, two weeks later, when Diane is away on a business trip, you wonder if Rick will revert to his old behaviors.

Another typical scenario would be for Rick to say, “I promise I’ll be on time from now on” and then not follow through, dodging Diane in the mornings. This “passive-aggressive” behavior has the underdog smiling and saying, “yes, yes, yes” on top of the table when under the table they are kicking and screaming, “no, no, no.” The person’s words sound compliant but their actions, body language, and tone of voice, are defiant. It takes a lot of skill, even for experienced managers, to confront passive-aggressive behavior because the behaviors are subtle and occur as an undercurrent; you don’t always realize what’s happening or that the damage has started to spread.

Managers need to remember that if they play topdog too heavily, they will automatically arouse in their employees an equally strong and rebellious underdog, especially those with passive-aggressive tendencies. The more criticized and vulnerable the underdog feels, the more rigidly it will put its stake in the ground. As with any resistance, the rule of thumb is to get the person to air their concerns openly so they can be addressed and talked through. If an employee recognizes their ambivalence about change, and their personal topdog/underdog challenge, they are closer to acknowledging fear and moving forward with courage.

Six Things a Manager Can Do About Employee Resistance

Here are 6 things a manager can do to encourage an employee to change, while averting a stalemate with his or her underdog:

1) Lay out the desired behavior change in a calm, objective way.

Avoid sounding like a punishing parent or a preachy sermonizer. Simply discuss the business need and the impact that the change will have on the person’s development and leave out the judgmental voice. If you get too critical or dogmatic, you set yourself up for a negative reaction.

2) Acknowledge the employee’s ambivalence about making the change.

Let them know you recognize how hard it can be to make this change and you appreciate the difficulty of this challenge. Volunteer any strategies you might have used in the past to overcome your own barriers or offer to brainstorm together how to defeat the obstacles. After that, give them space to figure out how they will solve their problem and make the necessary adjustments and set a timetable for following up.

3) Continue to hold the person accountable for their job performance.

Despite any manipulations or sidetracks the person may throw your way, continue to hold your ground that this is a vital aspect of their job performance and their work will need to be up to standard. If you accept mediocre or inconsistent results, you will be lowering the bar for that employee, the department, and yourself.

4) Confront the person on their resistance when you see it or hear it.

If you observe the person “acting out,” don’t sweep it under the rug. Privately call them over, let them know what you observed and give them an opportunity to share what’s going on. When people feel they can talk through their discomforts in a safe environment, they are more likely to give up some of their “armor” and bring themselves to a less emotional, more rational way of viewing their situation.

5) Put the ball in their court.

Let the person know you care about them and their development, but that you cannot do this for them. Clearly lay out the goal, offer support, coach them through the transition, but ultimately, it will be up to them to do it or not. If they believe that this is all your agenda, the focus will become about you. If they like you, they might do it; if not, they might resist more. Take yourself and your personal agenda out of the middle and leave the decision and the responsibility in the person’s own hands.

6) Celebrate success.

Ken Blanchard, of *One Minute Manager* fame, says to catch people doing things right. In the beginning, even when people approximate the correct behavior, they should be positively reinforced. If you see acceptable progress, don’t give up on the employee and you’ll teach them not to give up on themselves, either.

The long-term answer lies in maintaining the delicate balance between *respecting* your employee’s resistance while still *expecting* them to make the change. The respect/expect juggling act allows you to support the human face of change without compromising the rigorous business demands of the organization.

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