



DEALING WITH RESISTANCE:

THE TALE OF MR. GILES

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SPCONSULTING

Handling Resistance

A career in consulting brings with it the opportunity to work with a wide variety of people at different organizational levels. This can be a very rewarding experience in terms of personal growth, but implies that consultants are required to build working relationships with a wide variety of individuals who have different personalities, backgrounds and agendas. This will require a degree of flexibility.

Consulting assignments are usually contracted to support the implementation of change within a client organization. The successful achievement of a client's vision may require changes to the organizational structure, the re-design of business processes or the deployment of new support systems.

Not everyone working in the client organization, however, may be open to these changes. Some may not believe that the proposed changes will result in favorable outcomes and may strive to

preserve existing ways of working; conflicts of interest and political agendas may play a role; the use of external ideas may be resented, commonly referred to as not-invented-here syndrome; and some may believe that their leverage within the organization will be compromised as a result of the new working scenario. These feelings translate into the phenomenon of resistance: a situation where client staff refuse to cooperate during a project or even worse take blocking actions to prevent progress within the assignment.

It is easy for consultants to be seen as 'the enemy' by individuals in the client organization

The skill of dealing with resistance is fundamental to any consultant and may constitute the difference between success and failure.

The approach for handling resistance does not have to be a complex one and begins by considering a fundamental question: 'Why?' Resistance is a natural human reaction and has many potential causes. If we can identify the most probable causes then bringing down what can be referred to as the wall of resistance becomes a systematic process of addressing concerns. The better the concerns can be addressed the lower the wall of resistance will become.

Case Example

A manufacturing company in London had decided to replace its aging accounting system. The system had been developed by the information technology (IT) department within the company many years ago based upon an old technology. Mr. Giles, the head of the IT department and his team were responsible for maintaining the system and had customized it many times in response to changing requirements.

Management had now decided to replace the system. The main drivers for this decision were to leverage new functions available in the latest accounting systems and to allow smooth integration and improved process flows. Mr. Giles had been put in charge of the project and a consulting firm had been engaged to support the selection and implementation of a replacement accounting system.

The consultants collected requirements from both the IT and marketing departments which were subsequently analyzed. They then evaluated different systems available on the market and formulated a solution proposal. Finally, they arranged a meeting to present their recommended approach to the client. On the day of the presentation the marketing representatives were enthusiastic but Mr. Giles and his colleagues were not. They attacked the proposal at every opportunity, challenging assumptions, adding additional requirements and asking questions that the consultants would clearly not be able to answer without further investigation. The

consultants acknowledged these concerns professionally and agreed to return the following week with an updated presentation.

At the second meeting, however, Mr. Giles and his team had come up with a list of new concerns. During subsequent meetings this continued and the consultants were forced to deal with additional points of criticism, time after time. As the weeks passed the marketing representatives became increasingly impatient as progress was slow and the new accounting system seemed to be a distant reality.

The consulting manager responsible for the work called a meeting with her team to discuss the situation. A lot of time and effort had already been expended, yet unless they were able to win the favor of Mr. Giles the project could not move forward. The team asked themselves the fundamental question: 'Why was this stakeholder so resistant to the proposed change?' They reached the following conclusions:

- Mr. Giles had been responsible for the development of the existing accounting system. He knew the system inside-out which was the source of great personal pride and made him something of an authority.
- The IT department was sitting on large budgets for the operation and maintenance of the existing system. These budgets would be reduced significantly once a new system had been implemented as support would be provided by the vendor of the new system.
- The IT department held a powerful position. Each time marketing wanted to make a change they had to present a request to the IT department. A new system would allow marketing to change invoice formats and payment terms themselves through a simple interface with little dependence on the IT department. 'Why had this used to take two weeks?' they would probably think to themselves.

In summary, whilst a new system would bring new features, lower costs and introduce integration possibilities, to the IT department it also meant a dent in their pride, reduced budgets and loss of leverage within the organization. The most likely causes of the resistance had been established.

Dealing with resistance begins by considering a fundamental question: 'Why?'

The consultants agreed that an approach to address this resistance situation would need to:

- Acknowledge the merits of the existing approach, ensuring that the recommendation of a replacement system was not perceived as a threat.
- Reinforce the importance of a replacement system to the business as a whole, preferably with facts that would be hard to contradict.

- Most importantly, put the IT department in the driving seat and demonstrate that the project could create a position of leverage for them.

Instead of scheduling another presentation for the following week the consulting manager called for a meeting with Mr. Giles and some of his senior team members.

'Mr. Giles', she said, 'Your team has been responsible for an accounting system that has served your organization well for many years. The proposal now to replace the system is intended to enable your company to compete more effectively in today's marketplace. A new system will allow you to offer customers flexible payment options, electronic invoicing and a number of other attractive features. Some of your competitors already have these capabilities which underlines the need to act quickly. But it is your department that will own the new system, and it is ultimately your team that will make this a success. How can we as consultants support you in the best way?'

The discussion that followed was much calmer in nature than those that had preceded it. The consultants emphasized the importance of the client's IT team within the project. They encouraged the IT managers to share their concerns, some of which provided valuable insights, so that they could be addressed appropriately. It was a turn-around meeting that finally enabled the project to move forward.

Lesson Learned

The consulting manager described the situation as an important lesson for her team. It is easy for consultants to be seen as 'the enemy' by individuals within the client organization. Without reversing this position, it is much more difficult to deliver value and a lot of time can be wasted in daily conflicts.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Samir Parikh is a principal business consultant, practice manager, and consultancy CEO with over 25 years of industry experience. In 2000, Samir founded *SPConsulting* a global management consulting firm specializing in organizational strategy and change management.

With a track record of projects conducted in more than 50 countries the firm works closely with companies that are transforming into consulting-based organizations, delivering solutions and professional services in highly competitive environments.



FURTHER READING

Samir is the author of *The Consultant's Handbook*, published by John Wiley & Sons. This book provides a comprehensive guide for the practical implementation of consulting skills by professionals working in consulting and professional-services-related disciplines.

The book contains additional guidelines, examples and use-cases to support readers in implementation of consulting techniques, as well as practical tips and lessons-learned from real consulting engagements.