

## **Resistance to Change: Why Does it Happen?**

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### **Author Note**

This is an assignment submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science (M.S.). Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Stephanie Lee. Email: sanoel@usnh.edu.

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### **Abstract**

Change in an organization is paramount to its survival. The need for organizations to change and adapt to the needs of their current environment are known to be a necessity of success but are often met with resistance within the organization. This paper aims to analyze current information on change resistance and why it occurs. Along with literature analysis a survey was conducted to compare information found in the literature to real accounts of people's resistance to change and what they feel they need for successful change within their organization. By understanding people's reasons for resistance organizations can begin to plan and prepare for resistance to make organizational changes successful and sustainable.

### **Resistance to Change: Why Does it Happen?**

To be successful, organizations must be able to adapt and respond to changes in their environment (Schweiger, Stouten & Bleijenbergh 2018). To do this, organizations must change, it is crucial to their survival in their industry. For the purpose of this study organizational change will be defined as a process that starts with an initial stimulus that motivates the organization to move from one state of being to another (Schweiger, Stouten & Bleijenbergh 2018). When organizations are moving from one state to another they can be met with resistance, which will be defined as opposition to the alteration of a certain situation and represents a regular reaction to change (Grama & Todericiu 2016).

Understanding that change is a natural evolution in an organization's life cycle the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding on why resistance to change occurs and to determine if understanding this resistance can allow organizations to modify the organizational change process to better initiate a change that is effective and sustainable.

Based off current research there are many reasons as to why resistance to change occurs. This paper will examine currently established reasons along with analysis of a survey amongst employees and a board of directors of a specific organization to determine if having the answers directly from those affected by change can positively impact efforts for leadership.

## Literature Review

### Introduction

Change management and how to effectively evoke change is a topic that is frequently discussed in leadership and business. It is often an area of contention where endless suggestions of resolution are offered but never found. Change is one consistency that all leaders can count on in their organization, whether it is by choice or by chance. John F. Kennedy once said” *Change is the law of life and those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.*” In this statement Kennedy acknowledge the inevitability of change, but also suggests that by accepting change and looking forward there is possibility.

There is a large variety of research and studies about change management and how to be a change agent. The focus of the papers aims to take current research, analyze it and determine if these reasons for resistance and suggestions on how to successfully initiate change, is something that would work in an organization that is highly resistant to change and stuck in the mind frame of “this is how we’ve always done it.” Being able to make this determination will help leaders utilize current ways of initiating change successfully or will show the need for new methods of change management. For the purpose of this study, resistance to change will be defined as any opposition to the alteration of a certain situation and represents a regular reaction to change (Grama & Todericiu 2016).

### Why does resistance to change happen?

Before deciding what tips and tricks to use to initiate change in an organization it is important to and why does resistance happen. We need to understand why people react in the form of opposition or reservation. Grama and Todericiu suggest that people’s reaction to the suggestion of change are dependent on their previous experiences along with their relationship

and perception of those initiating the change (Grama & Todericiu 2016). When an employee is resistant to change it can have a negative impact on the change process and has been associated with outcomes such as, decreased satisfaction, lack of productivity, and distress in an employee's psychological well-being, as well as increasing absenteeism and employee turnover rate (Van Dam, Oreg & Schyns 2008).

It is important for those trying to initiate change to understand that everyone has lived experiences. Those experiences, such as relationships with leadership, in relation to change can affect how they perceive new changes. If experience with leadership was lacking trust it could hinder the change experience. Trust in those leading change is considered to be an important aspect of change and is a vital component of a successful change process (Van Dam, K., Oreg, S., & Schyns, B. 2008). If they have had a positive experience with change then there is going to be more willingness to understand and try whatever changes are being proposed. When there has been a negative experience with change there is more reservation associated with the willingness to accept change.

Another reason people may be resistant to change is their relationship with the person or organization rolling out the change. When looking at relationships at times of change, a high-quality relationship is characterized by liking, loyalty, and professional respect between leader and employee (Van Dam, K., Oreg, S., & Schyns, B. 2008). The opposite, Organizational cynicism is a term often used when an employee's relationship with its employer is seen in a negative manner. This can be in lack of trust of others, lack of hope, exhaustion, absenteeism, along with several other negative workplace connotations. Cynicism in the context of organizational change represents a reaction to the failed attempts of change. This reaction shows the negative view on

future changes and the lack of ability in change agents to initiate change (Grama & Todericiu 2016).

### **What Does the Literature say to do About Resistance to Change?**

There are many methods available to use to initiate change in an organization, but before deciding on which method to use there are other factors to consider, especially when there are members of the team that are resistant to change. Some things to consider are: how severe is the problem that change is needed for? Is organizational culture playing a role in the unwillingness to change, and can it be turned into a tool for successful change? And lastly can persuasion and personality traits be used to reverse resistance to change?

Dalmu and Tideman offer a way to assess problems in a manner that will allow understanding of the severity of the problem along with the agreement or disagreement of this understanding. Dalmu and Tideman suggest using a model that was created by Ralph Stacy, they say it speaks to the types of problems or issues that arise for business leaders and executives. With these different problems comes the need to use different approaches and ways of thinking. (Dalmu and Tideman 2018).

### **Figure 1**

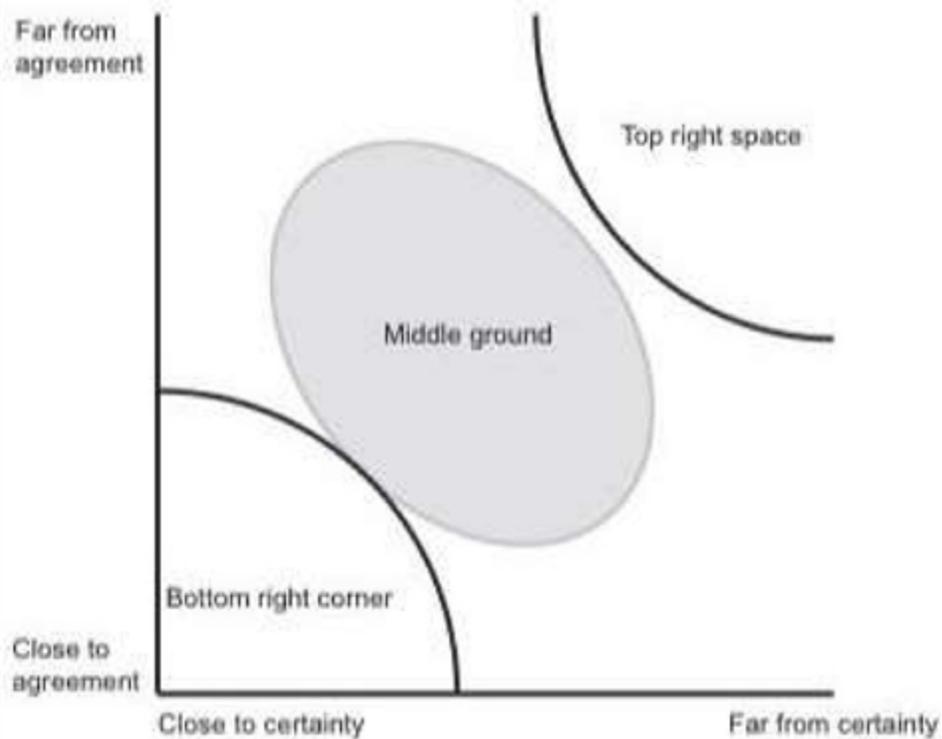


Figure 1 demonstrates the three areas of agreement for problems and shows the need for different approaches. The top right corner is far from certainty and far from agreement, implying there is a lack of consensus as to the nature of the problem and shows the lack of confidence that any known strategy will provide a predictable resolution (Dalmu and Tideman 2018). The middle ground shows problems and issues in which reasonable levels of uncertainty exists with known strategies and consistent levels of disagreement to the nature of the problem (Dalmu and Tideman 2018). Lastly the bottom right corner shows there is a close agreement on the nature of the problem along with close certainty there is a known strategy for resolution.

This information is important to understand when assessing the level of resistance to change being initiated to solve problems. Knowing where people lie on a situation along with understanding if they think known solutions will solve the problem. If there is a lot of disagreement with the nature of the problem along with lack of confidence, there can be a resolution there is going to be resistance. When people can agree on the nature of the problem

being solved and the confidence in a resolution are high, there is going to be less resistance to the change being suggested to solve the problem.

Another focus area for change resistance is organizational culture. Organizational culture reflects how employees act and interact, rise to challenges, responds to change, and how the organization presents itself to stakeholders (Howard-Grenville, Lahnman, & Pek, 2020).

Unbeknownst to those in the organization, the culture directly affects how people act, so it is important to consider when understanding why people are resistant to change and how to move them towards being a change agent. Acknowledging culture's pervasiveness and fluidity, managers and organizational scholars are now referring to organizational culture as a variety of "toolkit" resources (Howard-Grenville, Lahnman, & Pek, 2020). With this perspective people across all levels of an organization can use culture to help be more responsive to organizational needs and changes. Culture creates cohesion amongst employees when they internalize commitments and align expectations about how they relate to each other and to the organization's overall goals (Howard-Grenville, Lahnman, & Pek, 2020). While this cohesion is generally regarded as a positive it can have a negative impact when change is introduced if the culture's reaction is to resist change.

Organizations seeking to change do not need to disassemble their current culture and try to start over, leaders can instead take valued pieces of the culture and use it as a tool for change. If there is a desired planned change that needs to take place the person looking to initiate change can use the culture as a catalyst for change and focus on an aspect of the culture that is highly valued. Organizations can try to maintain a climate that promotes organization and individual development. A climate that fosters continuous development encompasses the different ways in

which the organization, its leaders, and its employees support, encourage, and exercise organizational and individual learning and growth (Van Dam, K., Oreg, S., & Schyns, B. 2008).

### **Conclusion**

With all the research on organizational change there are a variety of reasons why people are resistant. The importance comes not necessarily with finding ways to ensure resistance does not happen but understanding why it does. Whatever stage of the change process and organization may be in, resistance on the part of organizational members is highly likely. If we expand our dynamic understanding of the barriers that impeded effective change, we will gain more competence in successfully managing change (Van Dam, K., Oreg, S., & Schyns, B. 2008).

## Methods

A six-question survey was created to understand the participants previous experience with organizational change, and what they felt they needed to be part of a successful change initiative. The purpose of this was to determine if the answers given by participants matched what information is available on resistance to change or if there was a variation. Survey participants were provided with a list of characteristics previously identified as crucial to successful change and asked to select those that they feel are most important to them.

Participants were able to provide any additional needs they feel should be present during times of change. Those completing the survey are employees and board members to the local nonprofit, Boys & Girls Club of Manchester (BGCM). The agency is preparing to undergo substantial organizational restructure with both staffing and initiatives and felt information gathered with the survey would be beneficial in moving the organization forward. There is a wide range in age, gender, and ethnicity amongst those being asked to complete the survey. The information was collected digitally and anonymously, all results were provided as analytic data to BGCM

Participants were asked if they had ever experienced an organization change and were provided with the following definition to make sure all involved with the survey had the same understanding: "For the purpose of this study organization change is defined as an event that moves an organization from one point to another, or when working methods are changed." From there they were asked to determine if the experience was positive or negative, and list factors that contributed to their experiences. They were then asked to determine out of the same list of factors what they felt was most important to them to have a successful change. Once all this information was gathered it was compiled into charts to determine what factors were most important.

### Analysis

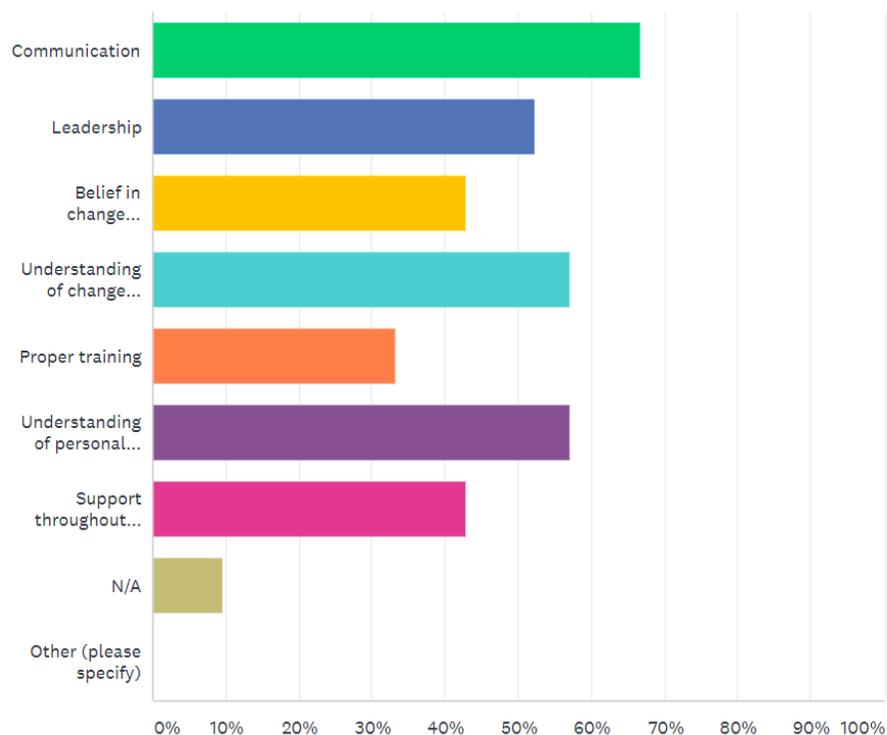
The survey was sent to a total of 45 people, a combination of fulltime employees and members of the board of directors for the Boys & Girls Club in Manchester. Out of that 22 completed the survey, 10 members of the board of directors and 12 employees. All 22 people who completed the survey self-identified that they had experiences organizational change.

When asked if the experience with change was positive 82% said yes, with only 18% indicating it was not. They were then asked what made the experience positive and were provided with a list of factors along with another section where they could add additional factors not listed. Those who indicated their experience was not positive were asked to indicate what factors contributed to their lack of a positive experience.

**Figure 1**

If you had a positive experience, what made it positive

Answered: 21 Skipped: 1



**Figure 2**

If you did not have a positive experience what factors contributed?

Answered: 16 Skipped: 6

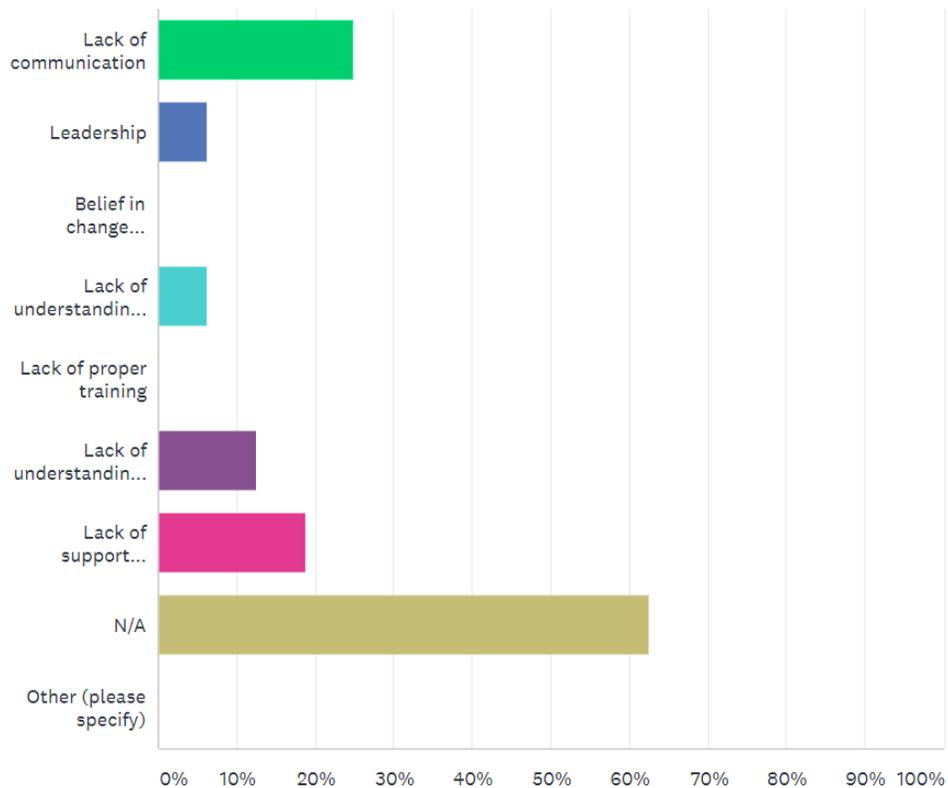


Figure 1 shows that communication, understanding of the change initiative, and understanding of personal role in the change initiative were all top factors to the participant's experience with change being positive. While simultaneously figure 2 shows that lack of communication, lack of understanding personal role in change initiative and lack of support during change are the top three factors that were listed to why a participant did not have a positive experience with change. Assumptions from these two comparisons indicate the importance of communication and understanding one's role in the change initiative for a positive and successful change initiative.

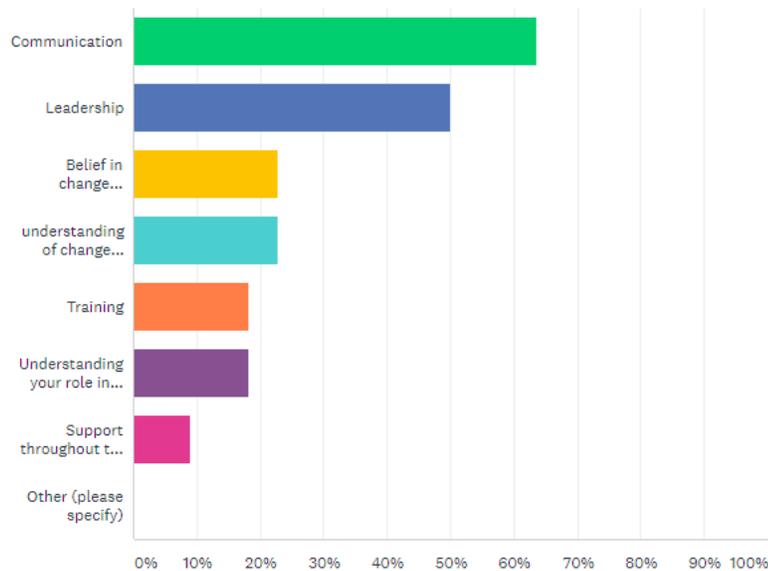
After looking at past experiences, participants were asked to identify what they perceived as important factors for themselves to participate in a successful change initiative. Participants

where again given the same list of factors with a space to provide additional options. Participants were able to select all factors that they felt applied.

### Figure 3

Please select the most important factor you would need for a successful change initiative to occur.

Answered: 22 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Communication	63.64%	14
Leadership	50.00%	11
Belief in change initiative	22.73%	5
understanding of change initiative	22.73%	5
Training	18.18%	4
Understanding your role in the change initiative	18.18%	4
Support throughout the Change	9.09%	2
Other (please specify)	Responses 0.00%	0

Figure 3 identifies the top factors for a successful change as: communication, leadership, and belief in and understanding of change as identified by the participants and their needs. This information does coincide with the information provided with the questions on what contributed to your positive experience, and what led to a lack of a positive experience with change.

Comparing information from those who had positive experiences, those who did not, and what participants identified as a needed item communication was the number one factor attributed to a positive change experience. The difference from the top factors in figures 1&2 compared to figure 3 do show a variation, with leadership being listed as the next most important factor needed for successful change.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations to the data collected and thus these limitations need to be considered when forming opinions on why resistance to change occurs. The limitations with these questions are: the inability to differentiate from the board of directors' answers and staff, a little less than half given the survey completed it, and the answers are very organization specific. The question was asked if the participant taking the survey was a staff or member of the board of directors, however the software used did not take this information into account when collecting the other answers. Having the ability to differentiate between staff and board of directors could potentially allow an organization to approach the topic of change differently during discussions, planning, and implementation if they can determine the needs of each group. If more people who were given the survey completed it, there would be a more accurate depiction of those who would be affected by organizational change. All answers to this survey are organization specific, while this may not create limitations for the organization, it does not give a broad insight into needed factors for change. Completing the survey among a more organizational diverse group would show more insight into the needs for all organizations, not just a specific one.

### **Next Steps**

Research into the topic of resistance to change will always be valuable for organizations. Change is something that is always going to happen, and the more organizations and leadership

can understand people's reactions or resistance to change, the more prepared they can be to successfully initiate change. It would be valuable for organizations to conduct a similar survey to understand their employees' experiences with change and to be able to ask them to self-identify needs for them to be a part of a successful change. When organizations have this information they can meet the needs identified by employees while also meeting the needs of their environment that is calling for change.

## **Conclusion**

Employees' reactions to change are considered critical for the success of change efforts (Van Dam, K., Oreg, S., & Schyns, B. 2008). Failure to change can be caused by many factors but employees' reactions to change, such as resistance, are important to take into consideration. Change efforts that take employee' reactions into account may prevent resistance to the change from developing (Van Dam, K., Oreg, S., & Schyns, B. 2008). Behaviors that can manifest with change, such as fighting, defying, and refusal, while frustrating and a hinderance, this feedback is valuable for organizations and dismissing it would divest the organizations of a powerful source of information in adjusting change initiatives. (Schweiger, Stouten & Bleijenbergh 2018).

Understanding people's "why" for their resistance can ultimately lead to the successful change of an organization. Being able to ask them what they need, such as strong communication, trainings, strong leadership, support throughout the process, etc., will ultimately help organizations figure out why people are resistant.

Ultimately there is no one reason to why people resist organizational change. The literature and survey both show there are a variety of factors that can cause someone to be resistant to change initiatives in the workplace. There should always be a focus on why people are resistant to change to understand why the change may not be successful, but there should be a bigger focus on the needs for success of those undergoing the change.

### References

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## Appendix A

### Copy of Survey & Consent

## Change Management Needs Assessment Informed Consent

1. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to understand your past experiences with organizational change and what you feel you need for a future successful change in your organization. This information will provide insight for the Boys & Girls Club of Manchester for future organizational change efforts.

2. Description/Procedures: The use of human participants in this project has been approved in compliance with Granite State College's Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research. If you volunteer to participate in this study, I ask that you to complete the following survey to the best of your ability.

3. Potential Risks: Information collected is strictly opinion based and all information is confidential. There will be no repercussions for any honest answers.

4. Potential Benefits: Information collected will be provided to BGCM in an effort to make future change efforts successful.

5. Participation and Withdrawal: Participation in this study is voluntary. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw or be withdrawn at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. No coercion of any kind is used in seeking your participation.

6. Payment for Participation: There will be no payment for participation

7. Confidentiality: Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as is required by law.

8. Identification of Investigators: If you have any problems or questions please contact Stephanie Lee at sanoel@granite.edu or you may contact

my professor, Joseph Mews, at joseph.mews@granite.edu

9. Rights of Research Subjects: Information gained about you as a result of your participation will be provided at the conclusion of the research if you request. You may withdraw your consent or your data at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Office of Academic Affairs at the GSC Administrative Center, 603-228-3000. Please contact the principal investigator, Stephanie Lee, if you are interested in receiving a summary of the research results

10. Consent: By clicking on the button below, you are consenting to participate in this research study. You may print out a copy of this informed consent to keep in your records. If you do not wish to participate, click the “x” in the top corner of your browser to exit. The survey will take no longer than five minutes to complete.

**1. What is your affiliation with BGCM**

Employee

- Board Member

***2. Have you experienced an organization change before? For the purpose of this study organization change is defined as an event that moves an organization from one point to another, or when working methods are changed.***

- Yes
- No

***3. Was your experience with change positive?***

- Yes
- No
- N/A

***4. If you had a positive experience, what made it positive***

- Communication
- Leadership
- Belief in change initiative
- Understanding of change initiative
- Proper training
- Understanding of personal role in change Initiative
- Support throughout change initiative
- N/A

- Other (please specify)

**5. If you did not have a positive experience what factors contributed?**

- Lack of communication
- Leadership
- Belief in change initiative
- Lack of understanding of change initiative
- Lack of proper training
- Lack of understanding person role in the change initiative
- Lack of support throughout the change
- N/A
- Other (please specify)

Question Title

**6. Please select the most important factor you would need for a successful change initiative to occur.**

- Communication
- Leadership
- Belief in change initiative
- understanding of change initiative

- Training
- Understanding your role in the change initiative
- Support throughout the Change
- Other (please specify)

Done