



How should you react to **opposition**?

Project leaders almost inevitably face some form of opposition at one time or another. Change always involves giving something up; when the status quo shifts, some people naturally feel they have something to lose. Most importantly, change inexorably creates doubts and fears. How can one be certain that a given decision will produce the expected outcome? How can one know whether the time and effort required to learn new skills and adapt will be ultimately rewarded?

Resistance to change is thus natural and legitimate. Opposition can be constructive, but it can also be essentially destructive when people have a knee-jerk reaction against the changes the project involves. People may begin to play political games to sway opinion to their side. Managing resistance is consequently essential to keep discontent from tipping the majority. At the same time, point out the experts, project leaders should be aware that opposition is not necessarily a bad thing. If managed well, opposition may even reinforce support for the project, because debate is an opportunity for people to air and defuse objections and doubts that might otherwise have festered.

However, we don't always naturally react as we should in the face of opposition.

Rational arguments often fall on deaf ears

When we are convinced a project is solid, after doing all the required studies, analyses, and thinking, we naturally try to convince opponents by explaining the rationale behind it. However, disgruntled opponents are not always willing to listen to reason at this stage. What they want is mainly to express their frustration and doubts. This is why rational arguments often fall on deaf ears, e.g.: *"Market research clearly shows that we must reallocate our efforts towards this segment"; "That is ridiculous! It would mean abandoning our core business! What could be more risky than that?"*

Counterattacks can be destructive

Opposition is often felt to be aggressive. The natural human response to aggression is fight or flight. Although it is sometimes possible to duck the issue, the temptation is great to respond in the same tone as the aggressor. This reflex must be avoided, however, because it triggers an escalation that is hard to stop. For example, in the conversation cited above, many would be tempted to respond with, *"It's even more ridiculous to remain stuck in a rut!"* - at the

risk of closing the door to constructive dialogue.

Avoid focusing on the opposition

Finally, when challenged by an opponent, we tend to focus our efforts toward managing the confrontation. However, virulent opponents often represent a small minority of those concerned. If you focus too intensely

To garner support for a project, managed resistance is better than passive acceptance.

on the naysayers, you may easily neglect the interests of the majority, and thus lose the support of potential allies.

To counter these reflexes, you must consider opposition as a natural part of any change project. You can then tackle it, not as an attack, but as a constitutive element of the change process, which must be managed as such.

Five recommendations to manage opposition more effectively.

- 1 **Prepare** to meet opposition
- 2 **Encourage** opponents to express themselves
- 3 Prefer **simplicity and clarity**
- 4 **Speak to the heart**, not the head
- 5 **Reassert** your position

1st recommendation

Prepare to meet opposition

Remember

- **Don't be on the defensive.** It is normal and inevitable for some people to be against your project. Don't take this as a personal affront.
- **Control your temper.** The desire to respond tit for tat is a profoundly embedded human reflex, regardless of how calm you may be under normal circumstances. Breathe deeply before answering, or take a break if necessary and possible. Try to reformulate what the critic has said before responding, and ask him or her to clear up specific points. These tactics can gain you precious time to collect yourself.
- **Don't seek perfection.** You will probably never be able to convince everyone. The essential point is to have enough people behind you supporting the project.

"Being contested is being acknowledged."
Victor Hugo

Opposition is particularly dangerous when it catches us short. At such times, we are likely to be carried away by our defensive reflexes and risk feeding fuel to the fire.

Most importantly, you must **prepare to respond calmly and politely**, which is far from natural! The leader of a transformation project of a large corporation learned this lesson from bitter experience. After months of consultations and amending the original project many times in light of the reactions encountered, he presented the recommended change plan to the steering committee. Yet, the project was peppered with criticism as soon as the presentation began, even by those whose views had been taken into consideration. They seemed to have forgotten that the company had to change in order to survive in a rapidly consolidating market. Taken aback, the project leader blurted out, *"With reactions like these, we're heading straight into the wall!"* He regretted it for years afterwards. Opponents to the project were irked and stopped listening. Even supporters, shocked by the leader's attitude, stayed silent rather than coming to his aid. The balance of power shifted and the project was rejected,

despite the fact that the majority initially supported it.

To avoid reacting in such an unfortunate manner, **personal work** is essential. Indeed, it is important to recognize that some form of opposition is normal and legitimate, no matter how good a project may be. Adopting this mindset helps project leaders avoid feeling attacked and reacting too emotionally when they encounter opposition.

It is also a good idea to be **physically prepared** to bear the tension created by potential aggression. Leaders may not get sufficient rest nor have a generally healthy lifestyle when they are focusing

Don't try to avoid opposition, but prepare to welcome it.

on a high-stakes transformation project. However, this has a decisive impact on stress management and thus on the ultimate success of the project. Taking a short walk or doing some relaxation exercises just before a sensitive meeting can also improve short-term physical preparation.

In parallel, project leaders are advised to **prepare answers** to questions likely to be posed. A third-party devil's advocate can help the leader imagine the most unjustified or selfish objections that he or she may have trouble imagining alone.

Identify common techniques to sabotage an idea

When an opponent wants to stop a project from succeeding, he generally resorts to four principal tactics, above and beyond simple arguments. Being aware of these strategies will help you be better prepared to respond.

Worsen fears

Change naturally generates fears and concerns. Opponents tend to stir the pot in order to exacerbate these fears.

- **Cite an undeniable fact, and tell a dramatic story** around it, based on contestable logic, e.g.: "Despite major cutbacks, X still went bankrupt. We could go under too if we cut back our resources."
- **Draw an analogy with painful events**, even if there is no logical connection. "You'd think these were the bleakest hours of the Soviet Union..."

Blur the message

Change always generates a certain degree of uncertainty. Adding to the confusion can seriously undermine a project.

- **Cite facts unconnected to the topic at hand**, e.g.: "How will these measures affect project X?" (although the measures are irrelevant to project X); "Have you considered the situation in Southern Europe?" (indirect and tenuous connection);
- **Make complex extrapolations** that are difficult to follow. "Based on a serious analysis of the data in this report (25 pages of numbers), we can suppose that..."

Create delays

Foot dragging and other delay tactics are sometimes enough to kill a project off completely.

- **Multiply meetings and validation steps.** e.g.: Create a commission in charge of analyzing a trivial aspect of the project; ask for additional studies; involve other stakeholders, etc.
- **Create diversions**, e.g.: Flag an important issue that must be resolved before the project can move forward; demand that another project be completed before starting this one; monopolize the time set aside for discussion to talk about a trivial aspect, and thus avoid covering other aspects.

Attack the project leader

Discrediting the originator of the idea can deal a fatal blow to a project.

- **Adopt a condescending tone or attitude.** e.g.: "How can you hope to turn the company around with this nonsense?"; "This project seems promising, but it's much too simplistic."
- **Make the project leader seem incompetent.** e.g.: Cite facts he or she doesn't know; question the hidden motives behind his or her proposals; ask questions he or she cannot answer.

Based on **Buy-In** John P. Kotter, Lorne A. Whitehead, Pearson, 2010.

2nd recommendation

Encourage opponents to express themselves

Our natural reflex when faced with resistance is to silence or brush aside project detractors. First, because feeling attacked is uncomfortable; and second, because opposition could well stop the project from moving forward. However, the experts advise adopting the opposite attitude: rather than hoping opponents will shut up, encourage them to state their objections more deeply, provide more detailed arguments and reveal the real message between the lines.

Listening to objections without interrupting is indeed a sign of respect. Cooperation may be possible despite a disagreement, to the extent that each side knows the position of the other and feels heard. Listening is also a way to reinforce your credibility with sup-

Sincerely listening
is the best way to
overcome opposition.

porters. To do this, be sure not to cut people off and avoid revealing your irritation with your non-verbal communication. The partner of a large consulting firm tells that he made a habit of using a whiteboard to note down all of the objections raised when he presented a change project. In the process, he made these points visible to all, underlined the fact that he had heard them, and helped everyone put things into perspective.

However, listening passively is not enough. **Asking about the precise meaning of objections** shows a sincere interest and a real desire to understand. It also gains you time to prepare an answer and try to convince the detractors, while reassuring supporters and those who have not yet clearly taken sides.

Listen attentively

Hearing an objection doesn't mean you understand it.

- If you notice **implicit meanings**, make them explicit to clear up potential misunderstandings. e.g.: "You're predicting failure. Do you mean you don't think we have the required skills?"
- Ask your opponents about the **reasons and the exact nature** of their objections. e.g.: "You say that customers won't like this product. What makes you say that? To which customers are you referring?"
- **Reformulate** the opponent's message to give him, or her, a chance to be more precise. e.g.: "If I understand you correctly, what you don't like about this project is..."
- Ask the **whole group** to identify whether the objection is isolated or is a majority view. e.g.: *Who else shares this fear?*

"Opposition is not a sign of falsehood, nor lack of opposition a sign of truth."

Blaise Pascal, Pensées

3rd recommendation

Prefer simplicity and clarity

It is very tempting to address objections with detailed arguments, because this shows you know your stuff and appears to cut the opposition short. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. Most of the time, **the more details you give, the more questions and doubts people have**. Take a classic objection: "Why change, when we have always done just fine as we are?" You could enter into a detailed debate on the meaning of success, how much the world has changed, why existing methods are no longer adapted, etc. Yet, this form of debate has almost no chance of getting people to agree. The most effective answer is probably the simplest:

The simplest
answers are the
most convincing.

"The world has changed, and we must adapt." This is how great leaders, such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, managed to rivet attention and build support with extremely simple messages. Their common sense image and the clarity of their message convinced

people more effectively than any sophisticated argument.

It is thus best to **employ simple messages rather than exhaustive arguments**. The virtues of simple words, with no jargon, short and direct sentences and concrete examples, cannot be overemphasized. It is also fundamental to stay focused on one key message, without being sidetracked by diversions and side-discussions.

Make it simple

A simple message captures attention much more effectively than a lot of details.

- Use **short sentences**, the active voice and a direct style. *Your message will likely be blurred if you use complex sentence structures with many subordinate clauses, double negatives, or the passive voice.*
- Choose **unambiguous statements**. As much as possible, avoid euphemisms, implied meanings and humor, which are subject to interpretation.
- Don't use **jargon**. *Although complex terms may position you as an expert, they are not helpful in building trust and may instead make people feel you are talking over their heads to confuse the issue.*

4th recommendation

Speak to heart, not the head

Example

A coach felt that one of his executive clients was very reluctant. He chose to address these objections by telling a story. He cited the example of a previous assignment in which he had been welcomed very coldly by a leader who feared manipulation. He told how their relationship evolved, emphasizing the executive's stress and anxiety and the discomfort the coach felt when faced with the man's suspicions. He then recounted how he gradually built his credibility and how their relationship first became more peaceful, then dynamic. His emotion was palpable when he evoked the quality of the trust that had been built between them. This approach was much more subtle than any rational argument showing that the coach would never manipulate a client!

Most problems that arise in business have several possible responses. Explaining your rationale shows how you arrived at your conclusions. But most of the time, it is possible to arrive at a different conclusion with the very same facts. This is demonstrated by the variety of opinions amongst leading global economists on what to do in times of recession. These recognized experts all start with the same observations, but draw fundamentally different conclusions. Ultimately, in an imperfect world where no absolute truths exist, intimate conviction is what makes the difference. **Trying to convince others through logic alone is thus pointless.**

Speaking to the heart, on the other

hand, can often sway opinion. This is primarily a question of demonstrating empathy by showing that you perceive the emotions of your counterparts. For example, you could talk about a customer who buys the new product and how it will change his or her life; show that you understand the feelings of employees affected by a restructuring; talk about yourself by revealing your weaknesses and doubts, etc. A good way to do this is with **storytelling**. The reach of a story is incomparable to that of rational arguments to convey emotions and build trust. Those who hear the story can feel the consequences of the project as if they were actually experiencing it, thus facilitating their adhesion.

Rational arguments are rarely sufficient to counter opponents.

Communicate your emotions with a story

Stories reach people effectively because they create a real experience.

BE SPECIFIC	USE MANY DETAILS	USE IMAGES	SURPRISE
Better than a universal story, a specific story makes it possible for listeners to project themselves and link the story with their personal situation, e.g.: Tell the story of a family rather than the misery of a people.	Details make the story seem credible. Describe the decor without leaving out sensory details, and portray each character precisely. This will make your story more vibrant.	Picturesque language reinforces the reach of a story, e.g.: Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" metaphor charged his remarks with emotion and convinced Americans not to ignore events in Europe.	The most memorable stories are those that stimulate curiosity or amusement, e.g.: Specifying that the leader in your story lived in 16 different countries will grab the attention of your audience.

5th recommendation

Reassert your position

Be assertive

Even if disagreement should be expressed, it must not prevent the project from moving forward. Clarifying this will greatly facilitate the effective implementation of the project.

- Summarize the general outline of the project as approved. Specify any changes that have been made, if applicable.
- Go over the main reasons you decided not to consider certain objections. As much as possible, cite concrete facts and figures to support your reasoning, as the latter are difficult to contest.
- Rely on people who have expressed their agreement. Cite them and invite them to make a visible commitment.

To keep resistance from gaining the silent majority, or even the active supporters of the project, the listening phase must be followed by the **reassertion of your point of view**. If you have revised your original position even partially following discussion, it is important to explain how these objections will be integrated into the project. However, you must not neglect to clarify your position and specify what will remain unchanged, or you risk muddling the message: *"We are maintaining our decision to lower operating costs by 1.5*

percent. However, the calendar has been modified to take account of your remarks."

To do this, it is a good idea to **involve project supporters** and encourage neutral fence-sitters to take a stand in order to refocus discussion on the project. Too often, a small minority of opponents occupies most of the terrain, leaving the mistaken impression that the majority is against the project. Going around the table, taking a vote, or drafting a summary of the discussion signed by everyone can also be good ways to reestablish the balance of power.

Listening to the opposition is not the same as giving in.