



Human-Centred Change

Why people are not the problem

People are often described as resistant to change.

But resistance is rarely the whole story.

People may be unclear, overloaded, unheard, anxious, unconvinced or trying to make sense of what the change means for them.

The issue

Change is often planned around structures, processes, systems and timelines. These things matter, but they are only part of the story.

For change to work, people need to understand what is changing, why it matters and what it means for them in practice.

When people appear resistant, it may be because they are unclear, overloaded, unconvinced, anxious or carrying the memory of previous changes that did not go well.

Bridges' Transition Model highlights the internal psychological transition people go through during change.

ADKAR offers a practical lens for understanding what people need: awareness, desire, knowledge, ability and reinforcement.

Together, they show why successful change depends on readiness, capability and lived experience — not just communication and implementation plans.

Key Question

Before asking **“Why are people resisting?”**, ask:

“What might people be experiencing that makes this change difficult to engage with?”



What Looks Like Resistance May Be Something Else

Behaviour is often a signal. The task is to understand what sits underneath it.

When people do not immediately engage with change, it is easy to label them as negative, difficult or resistant.

But what looks like resistance may be a reasonable response to uncertainty, poor communication, change fatigue, lack of trust or previous experience.

Understanding what sits underneath the behaviour helps leaders respond with curiosity rather than assumption.

What you might see	What may be underneath	What helps
Silence	Uncertainty, fear or lack of trust	Create safe ways to ask questions and raise concerns
Pushback	Unclear rationale or perceived risk	Explain the why, listen properly and respond honestly
Low engagement	Change fatigue, overload or competing priorities	Prioritise, pace the change and remove barriers
Rumours	Lack of clear or timely communication	Communicate early, honestly and consistently
Workarounds	The change does not fit the reality of the work	Involve people closest to the work in shaping solutions
Cynicism	Previous change was not followed through	Acknowledge history and rebuild trust through action
Compliance without commitment	People are doing the minimum required	Build ownership, meaning and visible reinforcement
Anxiety or frustration	Loss of control, confidence or certainty	Provide clarity, support and space to make sense of the change

Labelling people as resistant can close the conversation too early. Curiosity keeps the door open.

The 5 Human Questions Of Change



Simply Wright

A simple diagnostic for understanding what people need to move with change.

A human-centred approach does not mean avoiding difficult change.

It means recognising that people need more than information. They need clarity, meaning, capability, capacity and reinforcement.

These questions help leaders understand what may be missing.

Do people understand it? Focus: Clarity and awareness

Ask:

What is changing? Why is it changing? What will be different in practice?
What is still unclear?

Do people believe in it?

Ask:

Why would this matter to people? What concerns might feel valid from their perspective? What history or trust issues may affect how the change is received? Where do people have genuine influence?

Can people do it?

Ask:

What do people need to know? What skills or support will they need?
Where might confidence be low? What practice or guidance would help?

Do people have space for it?

Ask:

What else is already demanding people's attention? Is the pace realistic?
What needs to stop, pause or be simplified? What barriers need removing?

Is it being reinforced?

Ask:

Are leaders reinforcing change consistently? Do systems and processes support the new way? What happens when people use the new approach?
What happens when they do not?

Change becomes more human when leaders stop asking only **“Have we told people?”** and start asking **“What do people need in order to move?”**

Making Change More Human

Human-centred change still needs structure, pace and accountability. It also needs listening, involvement and support.



Simply Wright

Before change: Understand the lived reality.

- Clarify why the change is needed.
- Understand what people are currently experiencing.
- Involve people closest to the work early.
- Identify likely concerns, losses and barriers.

During change: Communicate, listen and adapt.

- Communicate honestly, even when everything is not yet known.
- Give managers clear messages and practical support.
- Create safe routes for questions and feedback.
- Remove barriers where the change does not fit reality.

After change: Reinforce and learn.

- Review what has changed in practice.
- Recognise progress and examples of the new way of working.
- Address unintended consequences.
- Keep listening after implementation, not just during launch.

The next time people are described as resistant to change, pause and ask:
“What have we not yet understood about their experience of this change?”
If the answer is uncomfortable, that may be where the real work begins.

Evidence base

Bridges — Transition Model

Focuses on the human side of change and the psychological transition people experience through endings, the neutral zone and new beginnings.

<https://wmbridges.com/about/what-is-transition/>

Prosci ADKAR Model

A practical model focused on the individual outcomes needed for change: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability and Reinforcement.

<https://www.prosci.com/methodology/adkar>

Kotter — 8-Step Process for Leading Change

A structured approach to creating urgency, building alignment, enabling action and sustaining change.

<https://www.kotterinc.com/methodology/8-steps/>

Levin — Change Model

A foundational model often summarised as unfreeze, change and refreeze. Useful as a simple structure, though real change is often less linear.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2444569X16300087>