The Consultant’s Guide to Beyond the Wall of Resistance

I wrote this guide (and the accompanying Podcast) as a companion to the 2010 paperback edition of Beyond the Wall of Resistance. I assume that you have access to that book. I encourage you to read the book (or at least skim through it so that you understand the major ideas I cover) before reading this white paper.

- Rick Maurer

The Challenge for Consultants

In spite of all the money that gets pumped into change management, it’s still a tough sell. People are skeptical. They fear that change management will take too much time, cost too much money, and distract people from the real work of change. Or they may not know enough about what it entails to have an opinion, so they just skip it altogether.

One consulting firm created a change management practice, and then relegated many of those practitioners to feel-good assignments. When the client needed a break, they would call in the change management team to conduct an ice-breaker, teach some personality theory, or to do some teambuilding. It didn’t take long for that change management practice to lose its footing, and become a fairly insignificant force. Sadly, in some circles, change management has become the clown act at the circus: they keep people entertained and distracted until the next “real” act can set up. It doesn’t have to be that way.

In this brief white paper, I cover ways that you could use the approach to change that I call Change without Migraines™ with your clients. I hope you find it helpful.

Helping Your Client Get Oriented

The two foundation pieces of the Change without Migraines™ approach – the cycle of change and the three levels of resistance and support – can help your clients get oriented with what they need to pay attention to today, as well as in the near and distant future.
This approach can help you (the consultant) get oriented as well. For example, you may find that there are stages in the life of a change where you love to work and have all types of interventions in your kitbag. However, other stages may be messier or less interesting and so you inadvertently skip over them. . . And if you find that your client sees things the way you do, you could easily collude to skip over vital portions in the life of a major project.

The levels of resistance will come into play for you, your client, and the client organization at every step along the way. The more adept that you and your client are at observing whether Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 are working for or against the change, the more effective you can be in developing strategies to avoid or work with resistance. If you (or your client) are oblivious to why people support and resist change, you are likely to be unpleasantly surprised when subtle reluctance turns into full-blown opposition.

**Using the Cycle of Change**

See Chapter 2 for a full description of the cycle.

I divide change into four major stages. I cover these in Chapters 6 through 9 of the book. But, before you think in terms of stages, think about the cycle as a process.

I find that the cycle is an easy (and effective) way for my clients to identify where the work is today, and what portions of the cycle they might tend to avoid or ignore.

Here is a simple activity I often conduct with planning groups. I ask everyone to stand. I point to the head of the room and say that it represents the top of the cycle. The three o’clock position represents “See the Challenge”. Four-thirty is the “Getting Started” point. Seven is “Roll-out”. And nine o’clock is “Results”. I move to the center of the room and say this is where “Resistance” resides. (I don’t think it is necessary but, if you wanted, you could tell people they can stand at 10:30 on “Time to Move On”.)

I define each of these places on the cycle, and then ask people to stand at the point where they personally enjoy working most. I then ask them to stand at the point on the cycle where work is needed on the cycle today. Often there is a lot of movement across the room. This can lead to an interesting discussion about where they like to work and where the work is. Also notable is what they might over-look or try to foist off on others. (Sometimes I add a step after standing where you like to work. Stand at the point on the cycle where you feel most uneasy, unskilled, or bored and discuss why.)
Sometimes I will ask the group or sub-groups to discuss a past change using the language of the cycle. Have them speak to what they observed: What seemed to work well or not well during this change and why. This activity helps anchor the cycle in people’s minds, and people begin to see how this can be a tool for both planning and evaluation.

My work is built on a foundation that I learned at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. (The Cycle of Change is based on the Cycle of Experience that I learned there.) Another important part of the Gestalt theory is Arnold Beisser’s Paradoxical Theory of Change. He suggests that change does not occur when we try to push it or make it happen, but when people are more fully aware of the status quo. This discomfort with the current state is what will allow change to happen. Allow is the key word. I do not use the cycle of change to try to push people to the next stage or to force some timetable like “people should be out of the dark right before our first coffee break.” That type of thinking puts consultants in a position of trying to lead change themselves. That can result in us disconnecting from where the client needs us to work today. If the work is in the making of a compelling case for change, we need to encourage – even insist – that our clients do the work at this stage before moving on.

A side note: You probably noticed that there are many online resources associated with the paperback version of *Beyond the Wall of Resistance*. If you’d like to know more about the Paradoxical Theory of Change, see the link on page 29 of the book. It will take you to a Podcast I created on the paradoxical theory especially for this book.

**Using the Three Levels of Resistance (and Support)**

See Chapter 3 for a full description of the three levels.

Just telling people that there are three levels of resistance or support is often eye-opening. (By the way, I call them levels because each level is increasingly more difficult than the one that follows.)

Clients often think that piling on Level 1 information is what it takes to build support for change. That rarely works. Explaining the three levels provide a new set of lenses with which to look at the strategies to be introduced or change to be discussed. It is pretty easy to see that their deck of 150 PowerPoint slides might address Level 1 issues, but it probably won’t touch Level 2 or 3. This opens the door to conversation about alternatives to the mind-numbing use of slides.

I didn’t realize it when I developed this model, but the three levels give clients an easy way to address otherwise sensitive issues. For instance, if I were to ask my aerospace engineering clients, “What are the emotional issues regarding this change?” the meeting would get real quiet, real fast. However, if I ask, “What are
the Level 2 issues? I am far more likely to get a pretty vibrant response. The same goes for Level 3.

As you will see in the next few sections of this white paper, the cycle and the levels are the major foundation pieces of the Change without Migraines™ approach. I don’t leave home without them!

**The Importance of “The List”**

The list has become my favorite informal tool. It’s quick and easy. Clients understand its utility almost instantly, and it helps us get at the real issues supporting or hindering effective change.

A number of years ago I was invited to make a presentation to a team that was planning a business reengineering project for their company. A couple of hours into the day, someone said, “Next week the bomb is going to drop.” Another chimed in, “It’s going to be a blood bath.” Other horrid images followed. Then someone asked, “What should we do?” It turns out, they were going to introduce their plan to a major group of stakeholders the next Wednesday.

How would I know what to say? I didn’t know these stakeholders or what they thought about the prospect of reengineering. I needed information quickly, if I was to go offer any halfway decent advice. Out of desperation, I created the first version of the list. I said, “Imagine that the fifteen of you are the stakeholders coming to that meeting next week. What would be on your minds as you walk into the conference room?”

As I wrote what they told me on a flip chart, I had an idea. I said, “I’m going to underline Level 1 issues with a red marker, Level 2 with blue, and Level 3 with green. As we looked at the list, it was clear that only a few items were Level 1. Everything else was Level 2 and Level 3. Someone said, “Oh, I see why we’re going to have trouble at that meeting. We designed an eight-hour planning meeting to address Level 1 issues. But people are coming with Level 2 and 3 concerns.” (Truth be told, that person started his exclamation with profanity, but I spared you that.)

Somebody asked if they could take the next hour and redesign that meeting. Of course, I said yes. They were brilliant. They took the entire list seriously, and redesigned that planning meeting so all three levels would get proper attention. I was told later that the planning meeting was a success and got the project off to a good start.

See page 153 to see a simple template for collecting Level 1, 2, and 3 information. (There is a link on page 151 to a printable copy of that same tool.)
Four Stages of Change

I identified four stages in the life of an organizational change. Most often, I find that the immediate work that needs to take place is in one (maybe two) of the stages. Limiting our field of vision can help us and our clients focus on what needs to be done.

Here are the four stages:

- “Making a Compelling Case for Change”. (Chapter 6 covers this stage.)
- “Getting Started on the Right Foot”. (Chapter 7)
- “Keeping Change Alive”. (Chapter 8)
- “Getting Back on Track”. (Chapter 9)

Once you and your client decide where the work is – making a compelling case, getting started on the right foot, and so forth - then dig into the appropriate chapter.

Each chapter includes a section entitled “What to Avoid”. I encourage you to read those items carefully and show them to your client. At the very least, this should lead to some engaging conversation. But, it will probably help all of you to avoid potential pitfalls. There is something reassuring about reading a list of “What to Avoid” and seeing ourselves in it. When this recognition occurs, it is a terrific time for you (the consultant) to lead a discussion. Ask them about the circumstances that lead to giving in to that failed tactic. You might ask what the early warning signs are that they are about to step into this trap. And then . . .

Discuss what options your client has for avoiding those pitfalls. A good place to start is by reviewing the “What it Takes. . .” section in the chapter.

You will see that the three levels of resistance or support are alive at every stage of a change. Each chapter describes how they come into play, and what to pay attention to.

A few added tips: I’ve started using a phrase to describe the work at each stage. It helps us stay focused.

The phrase for “Making a Compelling Case for Change” is why before how. See link to Podcast on why before how listed on Page 91. On page 90, you might read the “What to Avoid” item: “Moving to How before Why.”
The phrase for “Getting Started” is engagement. Of course there are many things that need to occur during this stage, but most of them can be found in any Project Management 101 text. Most leaders know those basics, but how to get people at all levels of the organization engaged so that they want to contribute to the planning and implementation of this major change can be challenging. There are many approaches to change that engage people deeply. Here are ones that I can recommend: Future Search, the Conference Model, Whole Scale Change, Real Time Strategic Change, Appreciative Inquiry, and Open Space Technology. If you currently use an approach that truly engages people in a meaningful way, there is no need to search for something new. Use what you’ve already got.

The key word for “Keeping Change Alive” is focus. You’ll note in Chapter 8 that the tactics to keep change alive are pretty obvious and most of my clients already know those things. Unfortunately, leaders are busy. Once they see that the project is gaining traction, they move onto the next pressing item. When they divert their attention to another project, it often sends the unintended message that this is no longer a top priority item. When that happens, it’s like draining all the energy out of the work. That’s why focus is so very critical.

The phrase for “Getting Back on Track” is dig deep. This is a tough one. It means finding out what the issues are on “the list” at a time when your client (and perhaps you) don’t really want to know what those level 2 issues are, and especially don’t want to know what those Level 3 issues are.

**Teaching the Change without Migraines™ Approach**

I like to teach this approach when the client needs to know more about leading change. I do not like to provide training to lots of people hoping that someday that might be able to use it. It is a waste of the client’s time and money, and a waste of the potential value we could be bringing to our clients.

I sometimes start a planning meeting by spending 20 to 30 minutes teaching the cycle and the three levels, so that everyone has a common frame of reference. That is often enough information to get started using the model. Since I am in the room with them, I can clarify and add more information as the meeting progresses.

Occasionally, I will teach portions of the cycle throughout the length of a planning meeting. People learn something, and then apply it. Learn something else and apply it. And so on.

On page 164 you will find a link to a Podcast on how to teach *Change without Migraines™*. 
Here are some tips:

- Make sure that that the leaders will make a commitment to use Change without Migraines™ as the way to frame conversations about change. If they can’t make that commitment, don’t teach it. It will just waste time or confuse people.

- Teach the approach to change as part of an engagement to everyone who will have some leadership role in the project. Cast a wide net. The more people who know the cycle and the levels, the easier it will be to begin using it as a framework for the work.

- Before teaching the model, make sure that people understand that they will be expected to apply it.

- After (or during) the training, make sure that people apply what they are learning to some aspect of this change. This is a must. (People forget what they learn when it is done at a rapid rate. So anchor their learning, and demonstrate leadership’s commitment to having a common language as they talk about change.)

- Coach your client so that he/she/they use this approach in all meetings that pertain to this change project.

Addressing Why So Many Changes Still Fail

When my publisher invited me to “tweak” my 1996 book for the 2010 release, little did he or I realize that I would rewrite the book. When I first wrote the book, some 70 percent of change in organizations failed. I was curious about what the failure rate was when I started the revision, and found that it was still near 70 percent. (You can find statistics in Chapter 1.)

As you will see in the book, I believe that most leaders know what it takes to lead change effectively, but they don’t put that knowledge into action.

I think there are three possible reasons why leaders don’t apply what they know about leading change:

- Perhaps they lack the skills to turn knowledge into action. If so, this is a place for intensive practice with feedback (not more theories, motivational speeches, books, or sit-back-and-relax training sessions). People develop skills by working their butts off. See Chapter 11 Moving Toward Mastery.
• The culture doesn’t support good practice. See Chapter 5 (ignore the Context at Your Own Peril). On page 71, you will find a link to an assessment your client can use to look at Theory X and Theory Y issues in their organization.

• Competing Beliefs. This is based on the work Immunity to Change by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey. I urge you to read my interview with them in Chapter 11 of Beyond the Wall of Resistance, and I truly encourage you to read their fine book.

These four points make sense to me and to the people I talk to, yet I don’t find a lot of leaders interested in digging deep into what causes repeated failures in their organizations. I thought people would clamor for that piercing level of self-insight. I was wrong. Little did I realize that they might actually resist! (I will have to read one of my books on resistance someday.)

I tell you this because you may be able to come up with ways of engaging clients so that they are willing to address knowledge, skills, culture, and competing beliefs as they relate to leading change in their organizations. If you develop a way to engage leaders so that they get excited about exploring knowledge, skills, culture, and competing beliefs (and it results in them inviting you to come back work with them again), please let me know. I would love to learn from you.

Further Resources

Beyond the Wall of Resistance (of course), but please don’t ignore the thirty-plus tools that I have posted online. These tools range from Podcasts to assessments to short articles.

Tools for a Change. This is my online newsletter and it is free. Every two to three weeks, I like to send out a short tip or reminder. I am up to somewhere around 90 such tips. www.rickmaurer.com Also, there are many free articles and tools on this website. I hope you’ll take a look.

Change Management Open Source Project. This is a free online community of people interested in change in organizations. You can lurk, join discussions, start discussions, or access a number of free materials. As I write this, there are over 800 members from at least thirty countries. www.changeOSP.com
About Rick Maurer

Rick Maurer is an advisor to leaders in large organizations on ways to plan and implement change successfully.

Many organizations and consulting firms have applied Rick’s unique approach to leading change including Lockheed Martin, Bell Atlantic (Verizon), Rohm & Haas (Dow Chemical), The Urban Library Council, Tulane University Medical Center, Deloitte Consulting, Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces, The Washington Post, American Management Systems, AARP, FAA, Mount Sinai NYU Medical Center, Charles Schwab, Sandia National Labs, National GeoSpatial Intelligence Agency (NGA), the District of Columbia Public Schools, the International Monetary Fund, and many other corporations, non-profits, and government agencies.

In 2009, Rick created the popular Change Management Open Source Project, a free resource for people from around the world who are interested in leading change in organizations. ([www.changeOSP.com](http://www.changeOSP.com))


The new paperback edition of Beyond the Wall of Resistance was released in June, 2010. The new edition addresses the question, “Why do 70% of changes in organizations still fail?”

In addition, Rick teaches at The Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. He is the author of many books on leadership and change, including Why Don’t You Want What I Want? and The Feedback Toolkit. He is also a fledgling part-time jazz musician in the Washington, DC area.

For more information about his work: visit [www.rickmaurer.com](http://www.rickmaurer.com) and [www.changemanagementnews.com](http://www.changemanagementnews.com) (blog). You can contact him at 703-525-7074 (US)