# Overcoming Compliance to Change: Dynamics of Power, Obedience, and Resistance in a Classroom Restructure

## Todd Bridgman[1] iD

## Abstract

Resistance to change is a central topic in the study of change management, with resistance by employees often portrayed as an inevitable and undesirable response to planned change that managers must attempt to overcome. While resistance can be detrimental to organizations, it can also be beneficial, by prompting deeper analysis of a change, or by preventing an ill-advised or unethical one. Yet it might be difficult for employees to voice their concerns about change, especially if implemented from the top down, because of the power relationships involved. This simple classroom activity, designed principally for undergraduate classes, simulates an organizational restructure, requiring students to reorganize themselves around the room multiple times on the order of the instructor. It provides an opportunity for students to analyze group dynamics, consider the value of resistance, and discuss how leaders can foster cultures that encourage employees to speak up.

## Keywords

Resistance to change has long been an important topic in the study of change management, originating with Kurt Lewin's field theory where the status quo represents a quasi-equilibrium state between driving and restraining forces (Lewin, 1947). Field theory inspired a generation of research into how managers could overcome resistance

[1]Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

**Corresponding Author:**
Todd Bridgman, School of Management, Victoria Business School, Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
Email: todd.bridgman@vuw.ac.nz

by employees, thereby enabling change and moving the organization to a new equilibrium (Coch & French, 1948; Lawrence, 1954; Zander, 1950). Today, the legacy of these studies is evident in the extensive coverage of the topic in management and organization textbooks (Cummings, Bridgman, & Brown, 2016), with models presented that aid diagnosis and treatment, such as Kotter and Schlesinger's (2008) contingency approach.

Experiential classroom exercises have been developed to teach undergraduates (most of whom have limited work experience) how to overcome resistance to change. Lewis and Grosser's (2012) change game requires students, assigned the role of managers, to lead others assigned the role of workers to adopt a prescribed classroom seating plan. Such exercises are valuable because resistance can delay and sometimes block much-needed change in organizations (Kotter, 2007). However, change management research and teaching has been criticized for adopting a one-sided view of resistance, assuming that change leaders and their changes are rational and in line with the interests of the organization, with resistance seen as irrational and dysfunctional (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Sturdy & Grey 2003).

A more rounded view of resistance sees it as being neither inherently good nor bad. Instead, it depends on the context. However, given the emphasis in change management education on overcoming resistance, there is a need to provide balance by considering the challenge of overcoming compliance. Power dynamics in organizations, especially hierarchical authority relationships between change leaders and recipients, means that compliance, rather than resistance, might be the most common response to change (Tourish, Collinson, & Barker, 2009). Power is understood as not necessarily coercive and oppressive but as synonymous with social relations, which can be positive or negative (Foucault, 1977).

My simple classroom activity provides undergraduate students the opportunity to experience these dynamics of power that are a pervasive feature of organizational life (Hibbert, 2012; Kern, 2000). The idea came from teaching change management to undergraduate as well as graduate classes. The MBAs were mid-career and had experienced multiple organizational restructures. Often, they viewed these structural reorganizations as change for change's sake by new managers seeking to make their mark on the organization and demonstrate their capabilities as leaders of change. In contrast, the undergraduates, with their limited work experience, were much more likely to accept without question the assumption that change is good and resistance is bad (Hibbert, 2012). For emerging adult learners (Dachner & Polin, 2016), experiential exercises are valuable in addressing their work experience deficit (Kern, 2000). This activity provides them with a change management experience to aid their critical reflection—in the form of a classroom restructure.

The exercise is suitable for any course where change management and leadership is taught, such as organizational behavior, organizational development, human resource management, and strategic management. It is an excellent exercise for kinesthetic learners who value physical movement rather than a traditional lecture (Fleming & Mills, 1992). The learning objectives incorporate the higher levels of Bloom's (1956)

taxonomy: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. By the end of this exercise, students will be able to do the following:

- Describe how they responded to a simulation of an organizational restructure, a prevalent change management initiative.
- Analyze the dynamics of compliance and/or resistance that occurred in response to the instructor's orders.
- Discuss whether resistance might be ethical and supportive of organizational objectives.
- Develop strategies for encouraging employee voice and minimizing the risk of dysfunctional compliance.

## The Activity

This activity requires no resources but only works when there are more seats available than students attending. A greater surplus of seats is better, since it will get more students moving as the exercise proceeds. The skills required of instructors are the same as required of them in class generally, namely, the ability to hold the attention of students and direct them in completing a task.

### Step 1 (5 Minutes)

Enter class before the students arrive and post an instruction (on the board or screen) that for today's class, students with surnames starting A to L are to sit on the left half of the room and students with surnames starting M to Z on the right half. Alternatively, choose whatever set of categories for dividing the class you deem appropriate. Students will enter, see the instruction, and most will comply. A friendly reminder can be given to those who either do not see it or ignore it. Avoid giving any explanation for why you are making the request.

### Step 2 (3 Minutes)

Once the students are all correctly seated, greet them, thank them for following the instruction, and ask them if they could now move so that all the seats from the front are occupied. Generally, some students will be reluctant to move, and this resistance can usually easily be overcome by repeating the instruction and maintaining eye contact with these students. You might also provide an explanation that it creates a better learning environment to have everyone seated from the front.

### Step 3 (3-10 Minutes)

Once the students are seated in their new arrangement, ask them to fill up the seats from the back. This request usually generates considerably more resistance, since it is

the opposite of the previous instruction, and it is difficult to offer a reasonable rationale for this change. Focus on the resistors, and repeat the request in a less friendly fashion. Increase the pressure to conform by telling them that they are wasting other students' time and the class cannot begin until they comply. If they continue to resist, threaten a sanction that you feel is appropriate for the norms of your university, such as asking them to stay behind after class. Punishing students for failing to comply with a nonsensical and poorly communicated order would not be appropriate. However, the threat is all that is required, since if students' resistance persists, the exercise has been successfully completed and debriefing can commence.

If everyone continues to comply, provide them another more complex task, such as ordering themselves in seats based on their age—youngest on the left and oldest on the right. The complexity of this instruction and their change fatigue will usually be sufficient to generate considerable resistance and complete the exercise.

## Debriefing (About 30 Minutes—Shorter or Longer If Required)

Debriefing can be done as a whole class or in smaller groups. It can be done after theory related to the topic of change management has been taught, before it, or concurrently, to help students make sense of their experience. The following questions are useful.

### What Did You Observe and Why Did It Happen?

Begin with this open question to avoid excessively framing students' responses for them. Capture their responses on the board or on paper, and use this material to give further prompts to help them extend their analysis. Most likely, there will have been a combination of compliant behavior (changing seats) and resistant behavior, from pretending not to have understood the instruction, slowness to move, through to outright refusal.

### What Were Your Feelings When You Were Asked to Divide Yourself as You Entered the Room?

Students might report feeling annoyed at not being able to sit in their preferred seat or being separated from their friends, confused as to the reason for the request, curious about what would happen next, and excited that they were doing something different from the standard class routine.

### Why Did You Comply With the Instruction?

Responses are likely to include that the order was coming from an authority figure (a teacher) and that they feared punishment if they did not comply. It is common for students to say that they complied because others did—in other words, that they conformed because of group dynamics and that they feared being singled out for attention

if everyone else moved and they did not. This effect is likely to be stronger as class size increases.

### Did Your Willingness to Move Decrease as the Exercise Went on? Why or Why Not?

Common responses for why they eventually resist include them becoming dissatisfied at the lack of explanation given as to why change was required, them becoming tired of repeated cycles of change, that resistance was easier because others were resisting, or that they felt pressure to conform to the resistance.

### How Could I Have Overcome That Resistance? What Would Have Worked Better and Why?

Possibilities include providing a better rationale for the changes requested, offering a reward for compliant behavior, or threatening punishment for noncompliance.

### Was the Refusal to Move a Valuable Response? Was It Ethical?

Prompt students to consider that their compliance was neither necessarily right nor supportive of class performance. Was the request to keep changing seats a fair request given that little or no rationale was provided? Was it motivated by my desire to flex my authority and feed my ego? This prompting encourages them to reflect on whether their resistance was the appropriate and ethical response.

### How Might This Exercise Relate to What Change Is Like in "Real" Organizations?

Draw a connection from the students' experience of the activity to a consideration of practical implications for organizations. Ask students what they have heard about change in organizations, or refer to a change management process that has been reported on in the media. For balance, invite students to take the perspective of employees as well as managers and consider both the potential strengths and limitations of compliance and resistance.

### How Might Organizations Reduce the Harmful Effects of Inappropriate Compliance?

Ask students what actions they could take to create a culture where employees feel empowered to raise concerns and voice objections without fear of sanction or retaliation. Suggestions might include active encouragement of employees to speak up, development of best practice examples, strengthening formal processes for listening to employees, and rewarding employees who speak courageously.

## Conclusion

From childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood; in the home, at school, and at work, we are encouraged to obey authority figures, and such obedience is valued and rewarded (Chaleff, 2015). Obedience and respect for authority have many benefits, including the creation of order, predictability, and accountability. However, there are also situations where compliance is not the best action. This easy-to-run and engaging activity enables students to reflect critically on the commonly held view in the teaching of change management that resistance is a negative feature of the change process that managers should do their best to overcome. While the downside of compliance can be taught in a standard lecture format, the exercise provides students a lived experience that can assist them in the important task of developing their critical thinking skills. The following appendices outline a supplemental activity (Appendix A), suggestions for connections to theory (Appendix B), guidance for handling potentially difficult student responses (Appendix C) and some personal reflections on running this exercise (Appendix D).

## Appendix A

### One-Minute Paper

A useful variation is to add a "one-minute paper" activity that provides students an opportunity to reflect critically on the exercise in a more private mode than in group or class discussion (Cross & Angelo, 1988). Give each student a small piece of card to be completed in class and returned to you as the student leaves the room. Prompts such as "What did you think was the main purpose of today's classroom restructure activity?" or "What did you learn from today's activity that you could put into practice in your future employment?" helps bring closure to the session and reinforce their learning. Responses have included, "Sometimes not following orders is the right thing to do" and "I will be more courageous and speak up about unethical and undesirable behavior." Reviewing responses in the aggregate at the start of the next class provides a useful recap and a bridge to the next topic.

## Appendix B

### Theoretical Resources

My preference is to run the exercise before students have been introduced to theory in order to make it more likely that they will respond in routine ways. However, theory plays a vital role in delivering the learning objectives because it provides perspectives that aid them in reconsidering largely taken-for-granted beliefs about the desirability of following orders.

Following debriefing, I introduce influential models such as Lewin's field theory and change as three steps (Cummings et al., 2016), Kotter and Schlesinger's (2008) model for overcoming resistance to change, and Kotter's (2007) eight-step model for

transforming organizations. I encourage students to reflect on the assumptions they make about change, leadership, resistance, and compliance.

In contrast, Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio (2008) demonstrate how resistance can be a positive contribution to organizations. For example, resistors provide valuable feedback that can improve the likelihood of a change succeeding or can put a stop to an ill-considered initiative altogether. Chaleff (2015) advocates "intelligent disobedience" because change leaders might have good intentions but outdated information, their assessment of the situation might be faulty, or their initiative might be ethically problematic. Tourish (2013) notes that change leaders might purport to act in the organization's interest while actually furthering their self-interest—perhaps driven by narcissism or by a desire to be seen as champions of change.

Students can also be introduced to classic social psychological experiments about the strong pressures for conformity that can override rational decision making and produce poor outcomes (Asch, 1958; Janis, 1972). These pressures are heightened when there are differences in formal authority between those giving the orders and those being asked to obey. Mention can be made of the Stanford prison experiment where participants assigned the role of prisoners passively accepted psychological abuse from those designated "guards" (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973), as well as Milgram's obedience experiments where (in the baseline study) a majority of participants administered what they thought were 450-volt shocks to learners, on the command of the experimenter (Milgram, 1974).

## Appendix C

### *Guidance for Handling Difficult Student Responses*

Experiments and experiential exercises that involve the dynamics of power, obedience, and resistance have the potential to elicit strong emotions on the part of participants when placed in hierarchical relationships such as learner–teacher (Milgram, 1974), prisoner–guard (Haney et al., 1973), or worker–manager (Lewis & Grosser, 2012). I have yet to encounter extreme or inappropriate student responses in the 20 times I have run this exercise over 11 years. My hunch is that unlike other simulations where students become teachers, guards, or managers—roles most will have no experience of— in this activity they occupy the highly familiar role of student, reducing the risk of them acting inappropriately. However, it is important to prepare for this eventuality. If extreme emotions involving resistance are displayed, the best response would be to end the exercise, since the objectives of the activity will have been accomplished. Move straight to debriefing and begin by reassuring the class that resistance to this situation is a normal and desirable response, as will emerge through the analysis.

## Appendix D

### *Critical Reflections*

Teaching this exercise for more than a decade has provided me valuable opportunities to reflect critically on my own practice as a teacher. It is tempting to see students who

voice disapproval about my teaching or the grade they receive on their assignments as troublemakers, lazy, or uninformed and, correspondingly, to view those who diligently follow instructions as ideal students. I have learnt to value student voice in all its different forms and to admire the courage of those who speak truth to power. To illustrate, until recently, I would begin the exercise by asking males to sit on one side of the room and females to sit on the other. It was not until transgender students voiced their concerns about my use of these categories that I realized that it was inappropriate. The lessons from this exercise are as valuable in the educational context as they are in business and other organizational contexts.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## ORCID iD

Todd Bridgman  https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3120-0075

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