

ERF Sensitivities to Change

Understanding and Solving Resistance

Rule of thumb for managers, project leaders, change agents, quality enhancers and other nags

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Summary: When we want to mobilise people into action, decisions, change, it quickly takes them out of their comfort zone, because they tend to be designed for stability and security. Confronted with something new, they sensibly check what consequences they personally might face. As soon as they are hit in a sensitive spot, they switch to resistance and block. We then get no reaction from them, open rejection or diversionary tactics. In order to achieve readiness for something new, we have to know three sensitivities (ERF), understand the needs behind them, in order to be able to serve them sensibly. Then resistance will also decrease.

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In the following you will recognise three sensitivities or resistances to change and learn three solutions to enable change/cooperation.

Why knowing ERF is helpful...

When we want to get something going, make an impact, change something, we need encouragement and cooperation from others. But sometimes we get no reaction or a negative reaction. We see this as resistance, because we are being held back. We do ourselves a favour and put ourselves in the other person's shoes. What exactly about the invitation to change does the other person reject? The change probably hits him in a sensitive spot because he sees one of his needs under attack. The better we can understand the other person, the easier it will be to build a bridge and serve the other person's need in an appropriate way, so that the resistance subsides. What's fascinating is that people have similar sensitivities. There are three and they begin with the letters ERF.

Structure: First follows for E, R, and F

1. an example...
2. the sensitivity and...
3. where it occurs and how to deal with it.

Let's go!

E R F

Example: *the Sirius Project with the well-established team is making slow progress, now there is a meeting to get it going again. "Dear colleagues, we all want to give the project a boost today and for that we need to change a few things. We need meeting minutes from now on. Who will write it? ... Silence in the room, nobody looks, nobody moves, nobody breathes. Because everyone knows that if you flinch now, you'll write the minutes.*

What is the name of the sensitivity...? **E for Expenditure!**

Everyone in the meeting asks themselves: «Is something being imposed on me now, is it costing me something?» The need underneath is: want to be comfortable, get comfort. It should be cheap, a good input-output ratio, do little and get a lot, hunt a bargain, profit!

Where: Where is E for expenditure to be found? Where something new is demanded. The purpose is still unclear, but the effort is now building up in front of you: In the example, it is the writing of minutes. Rarely does someone say: «I'm afraid of the effort of writing the minutes.», that would be embarrassing. Then it's better to say, «Who reads minutes?» That obscures and distracts.

Solution: How should we counter E for expenditure? If someone only sees the input side of the input-output equation, we should steer towards the output. We need to embed expenditure and communicate it in a reasonable way: It is a necessity in regard to a goal. In a meeting without any minutes, it is the opposite of wasting time, ineffectiveness. We aim to show results, monitoring implementation and progress. In this way, stupid effort becomes a meaningful investment. This already helps to create commitment. In addition, two things are recommended:

1. Rotation: that is, everyone writes the minutes once. «Writer, you can get it over with right now.»
2. «Writer, you're doing it for the team.» He can be a hero.

In summary: We have to reinterpret expenditure as investment, because only then does expenditure make sense.

E R F

Example: *I once lived in a house with one washing machine for all tenants. The washing schedule stated that each tenant was allowed to wash at three-week intervals - for three days at a time. The result: a big pile of laundry. Sunday was not on the schedule and I saw my chance to wash my clothes and hang them outside to dry... Much to the displeasure of my neighbour below me on the ground floor. He approached me with a series of questions:*

- «Wouldn't you like to wash during the week?»
- «Wouldn't you like to hang the laundry inside?»
- «Wouldn't you like to...?»

The questions misdirected us, away from where the rabbit lay in the hay.

What sensitivity is struck by my Sunday washing and hanging...?

R for Restriction.

A person is confronted with something new and wonders, «Is something being taken away from me?» The need behind it: a little garden of one's own, personal territory, freedoms and rights, earned privileges, vested interests, traditions.

Sensitive people understandably don't like to say honestly: «Hey, something is being taken away from me, I'm being restricted, my world order is crumbling and it's stressing me out!», but they rationalise and cover up their honest feelings. It would be embarrassing to announce: «It's my little garden». It would be more obvious to ask factual questions, to objectify... «Don't you want to wash during the week?»

Where: Where is there R as in restriction? For example, in teams: a new member joins and disregards existing norms, habitual rights of colleagues. R is found in all new systems and tools: regulations, standardisation, ISO certification, EFQM. Calculations that are perceived as rigid are pressed over living structures. That's where free spaces pop up. Time recording systems cause people to have to justify their activities. People love their freedom, so they say «no thanks» to restrictions.

Solution: How should we deal with R like restriction? As with E, we can also show the purpose here. Beyond that, two additional things are definitely recommended:

- 1) Ask for permission, inform, involve, make stakeholders out of those affected and....
- 2) Limit the extent of the restriction, show what remains, declare something as an exception, but leave the rule alone.

ER F

Example: The CEO is in the HSG diploma programme (an established Swiss executive training programme) and enjoys the exchange with other top executives from SMEs. He returns from St. Gallen with a compelling idea: to install a culture of errors in the company. «Errors are awesome!», he proclaims in the company. «If you don't make errors, you stay in the comfort zone. Learning from failures is great!» All the bosses are quickly enthusiastic about it. He installs a letterbox on each floor labelled «Errors», where all employees can report faults by filling out a form. Then the manager waits for the response.... It's discouraging. Friendly reminders to everyone fizzle out. The letterboxes remain empty.

It is natural that a sensitivity is triggered here.... **loosing Face**. The person «stung» at F ponders:

- «If I accept this change, will I risk losing face?»
- «Will I be embarrassed?»
- «Or am I making someone else lose face?»

The underlying need is: to look good, to be informed, to be competent, to appear consistent, to be right, to be blameless, to be recognised.

Where: F is always triggered where something new overwhelms people or shames them.

Solution: How should we cope with F like face loss? In our example, the manager needs to introduce the mailboxes with appreciative communication, pick a positive name tag («opportunities for improvement») and set a good example, by stating his fallibility and in the process of improvement: «You guys are great and together we'll develop even more.»

Other recommendations: We should communicate mindfully when overwhelmed by change. What is needed now is simply a learning investment. A change to the new only seems difficult as long as we want to make it overnight, as difficult as jumping from the ground floor to the first floor. We are not here to already know all things but to learn. We accompany each other, we set out together on the path, which is a staircase. Step by step, we make it together.

Conclusion

If you want to make a difference, if you want to change something, then you need encouragement and cooperation, a «Yes, I will join you.» You will get this more easily if your solutions leave the ERF-sensitivities alone... Or if they are already inflamed, you should transform ERF to meet your needs:

- Instead of E: purpose and benefit
- Instead of R: Freedom and participation
- Instead of F: Saving face

Good luck with this! If you need support, get in touch.

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