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RESISTANCE AS ENERGY: FROM ORGANIZATIONAL OPPOSITION TO CHANGE MOMENTUM

ОПІР ЯК ЕНЕРГІЯ: ВІД ОРГАНІЗАЦІЙНОЇ ПРОТИДІЇ ДО ІМПУЛЬСУ ЗМІН

Summary. *Introduction. Resistance in organizational change has been treated for decades as a barrier. Classical models (Lewin, Kotter) cast it as irrational or dysfunctional. Later studies recognized its complexity and identity-based roots but continued to frame it as feedback. The possibility that resistance is a direct source of usable energy remains underdeveloped.*

Purpose. This article reframes resistance as energy. It develops a conceptual model that integrates physics, martial arts, identity theory, and paradox theory. It proposes a framework for converting resistance into change momentum.

Materials and Methods. Conceptual analysis is applied across four lenses. Physics explains inevitability: every force generates counterforce. Martial arts demonstrate usability: opposition is redirected, not destroyed. Identity theory explains intensity: resistance protects meaning and belonging. Paradox theory explains necessity: resistance stabilizes continuity while forcing adaptation. Case illustrations from healthcare, manufacturing, and professional services support the analysis.

Results. The article introduces a four-step framework: Recognize, Surface, Redirect, Align. Leaders must legitimize resistance, bring its energy to the surface, convert it into constructive participation, and embed it into organizational identity. Case evidence shows that resistance rooted in values and identity can shift from obstruction to commitment, generating momentum for change.

Perspectives. Research should measure resistance as energy, track its longitudinal dynamics, and analyze leader micropractices of redirection. Theoretically, the paper extends change management beyond deficit views. Practically, it provides a disciplined method to use resistance as fuel for momentum.

Key words: *organizational change, resistance, energy, identity, paradox, momentum, organizational trasnformation, management.*

Анотація. *Вступ. У дослідженнях організаційних змін опір десятиліттями розглядався як бар'єр. Класичні моделі (Левін, Коттер) трактували його як ірраціональний чи дисфункційний. Пізніші дослідження визнали його складність та ідентифікаційні корені, але й далі визначали його лише як сигнал. Можливість трактування опору як безпосереднього джерела енергії залишалася недостатньо розробленою.*

Мета. Стаття переосмислює опір як енергію. Розроблено концептуальну модель, що інтегрує фізику, бойові мистецтва, теорію ідентичності та теорію парадоксів. Запропоновано рамку для перетворення опору в імпульс змін.

Матеріали і методи. Застосовано концептуальний аналіз у межах чотирьох підходів. Фізика пояснює неминучість: кожна сила породжує протидію. Бойові мистецтва демонструють використання: опір не знищують, а перенаправляють. Теорія ідентичності пояснює інтенсивність: опір захищає сенс та належність. Теорія парадоксів пояснює необхідність: опір водночас стабілізує й примушує до адаптації. Для підкріплення використано приклади з охорони здоров'я, виробництва та консалтингу.

Результати. Запропоновано чотириетапну рамку: Визнати, Артикулювати, Перенаправити, Узгодити. Керівники повинні легітимізувати опір, зробити його енергію видимою, спрямувати її у конструктивну участь і закріпити в новій ідентичності організації. Приклади доводять: опір, укорінений у цінностях та ідентичності, може бути трансформований з перешкоди на відданість і створювати імпульс змін.

Перспективи. Подальші дослідження мають зосередитися на вимірюванні енергії опору, аналізі її динаміки в часі та мікропрактиках керівників. Теоретично стаття розширює управління змінами за межі дефіцитарних трактувань. Практично вона пропонує дисциплінований метод використання опору як палива імпульсу змін.

Ключові слова: *організаційні зміни, опір, енергія, ідентичність, парадокс, імпульс, організаційна трансформація, менеджмент.*

Problem Statement. Resistance has been a constant theme in organizational change research. From Lewin's (1947) force field analysis onward, it has been cast as a barrier to be overcome. The prevailing assumption remains that resistance is irrational or dysfunctional, disrupting rational plans for transformation [10; 14].

This deficit framing shaped practice for decades: managers identified "resisters," sought to neutralize them, and treated opposition as error [5]. Yet evidence shows otherwise. Resistance is not marginal noise but a core dynamic of change. It arises from identity, values, and commitments [15; 7]. It exposes what people and organizations care about most.

Organizational change initiatives frequently fail because they lose momentum. Initial enthusiasm fades, energy dissipates, and systems revert to old routines [4]. The central challenge is not communication or persuasion but sustaining energy. Addressing this problem requires reframing resistance not as obstacle but as a potential energy source.

Literature review. Resistance as Obstacle. Lewin's (1947) model positioned resistance as restraining force. Change required weakening it. Kotter (1996) described resistance as a predictable barrier in his eight-step process. Oreg (2006) framed resistance as a dispositional trait. In practice, managers sought to identify and neutralize "resisters," treating opposition as error to be corrected [5].

Resistance as Information. From the late 1990s, researchers challenged this deficit view. Piderit (2000) showed resistance to be multidimensional, mixing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. Ford et al. (2008) argued resistance is often feedback, not dysfunction. Studies in healthcare and public administration found that opposition frequently expressed concerns about safety, values, or service quality [11; 17]. Constructive views acknowledged resistance but treated it as signal, not resource.

Identity and Paradox. Identity research revealed resistance as defense of the self [3;8]. Change that threatens identity provokes strong, persistent opposition, as seen among academics resisting performance metrics [9] or professionals protecting expert roles [1].

Paradox theory added further depth. Change embodies tension between continuity and disruption [16]. Resistance stabilizes identity while forcing adaptation, embodying paradox. Organizations that accept this paradox are more adaptive than those that try to eliminate it [2].

Gap. The literature moved from seeing resistance as obstacle, to information, to identity-laden paradox. Yet it remains framed as problem. What is missing is recognition that resistance is not only signal but energy — a force that can be used to sustain change.

Purpose of the article. The aim of the article is to reframe resistance as energy rather than obstacle. The objectives are:

Table 1

Evolution of Resistance Framing

Perspective	Core Idea	Works	Managerial Response	Limitation
Obstacle	Irrational barrier	Lewin (1947); Kotter (1996); Oreg (2006)	Overcome, reduce	Deficit framing, ignores meaning
Information	Feedback, signal	Piderit (2000); Ford et al. (2008); Thomas & Hardy (2011)	Listen, adjust	Stops at signal, not energy
Energy (this paper)	Usable force rooted in identity/values	Current study	Recognize, Surface, Redirect, Align	New framing; requires discipline

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis [7; 10; 12; 13; 15; 17]

1. To synthesize existing perspectives on resistance.

2. To integrate four conceptual lenses — physics, martial arts, identity, paradox — into a coherent model.

3. To identify mechanisms for converting resistance into change momentum.

4. To propose a practical framework for leaders: Recognize, Surface, Redirect, Align.

Contribution. This paper argues that resistance is not merely a reaction to change but a concentrated source of energy. Rather than suppressing it, leaders can channel it into momentum. We draw on four lenses — physics, martial arts, identity, and paradox — to reframe resistance as fuel, not barrier.

Our contribution is threefold. First, we move beyond the view of resistance as obstacle or feedback to frame it as energy. Second, we integrate metaphors and theories into a coherent conceptual model. Third, we propose a practical framework — Recognize, Surface, Redirect, Align — to channel resistance into sustainable transformation.

Theoretical Lenses. Reframing resistance as energy requires grounding. Four lenses provide this.

Physics shows inevitability. Newton's third law states every action produces counterforce. Change applied to the status quo inevitably generates resistance. That counterforce embodies energy equal to the initiating push.

Martial arts show usability. In Judo or Aikido, the practitioner does not block force but redirects it. Opposition becomes strength. Leaders who fight resistance escalate it; leaders who redirect it convert it into movement.

Identity theory explains intensity. Because identity provides meaning and belonging, threats provoke powerful protective responses. The energy of resistance is strongest where identity is at stake. If change is aligned with identity, protective energy becomes sustaining energy.

Paradox theory shows necessity. Resistance embodies the tension between stability and disruption. It both constrains and enables. Far from failure, resistance is the paradoxical condition of change.

Together, these lenses present resistance as inevitable, usable, powerful, and necessary — the foundation for reframing it as energy.

Resistance as energy source. Change requires energy. Formal strategies and structures are insufficient if momentum fades [4]. Resistance, because it emerges from deep attachments, contains concentrated energy.

Resistance can be read in two ways. As evidence, it proves that force has been applied: no counterforce, no real change. As fuel, it embodies energy that can drive transformation if redirected.

Identity protection provides one source of this energy. Scholars resist performance metrics not because of inertia but because metrics threaten their identity as independent thinkers [9]. Professionals resist billing reforms because they undermine their identity as trusted advisors [1].

Values provide another. Healthcare staff resist new systems not because they reject efficiency but because they fear harm to patient care. Energy mobilized in defense of values is strong and persistent.

Routines provide a third. Habits embody stored investments of energy. Disrupting them provokes resistance, but building upon them releases that energy into new practices.

Cases illustrate the point. In hospitals, nurses resisting electronic records framed their opposition in terms of identity and patient care. When redesign focused on preserving those values, opposition turned into advocacy. In manufacturing, resistance to safety protocols was reframed as pride in craftsmanship, converting opposition into a culture of mastery.

Conversion requires mechanism. Surfacing resistance brings hidden energy into view. Reframing changes its meaning from obstruction to commitment. Participation channels energy into contribution. Alignment integrates it into new identity, ensuring resistance ends as reinforcement, not sabotage.

The risk is romanticizing resistance. Not all opposition is rooted in values or identity; some is destructive self-interest. Leaders must distinguish usable energy from waste.

The proposition follows: resistance is not only proof of change but fuel for sustaining it.

Framework: Recognize, Surface, Redirect, Align. The question is not how to eliminate resistance but how to channel it. The framework provides a disciplined method to channel resistance which consists of four steps.

Recognize. Resistance must be acknowledged as natural and legitimate. Suppressing it drives it underground, where it becomes destructive. Recognition reframes resistance as energy rooted in commitment.

Surface. Hidden resistance drains energy. Leaders must create safe spaces for opposition to be voiced. Once surfaced, resistance becomes visible energy that can be redirected.

Redirect. Energy cannot be destroyed, only guided. Leaders must convert resistance into constructive effort: co-designing processes, testing alternatives, or advocating for values within the change.

Align. Finally, redirected energy must be integrated into the evolving identity of the organization. Only then does it become sustaining momentum rather than temporary compliance.

The process is cyclical. Each new initiative generates resistance. Leaders must recognize, surface, redirect, and align continuously.

This approach departs from traditional models that treat resistance as a barrier to communication or persuasion [10]. It treats resistance as energy to be captured. Properly channeled, it fuels lasting transformation.

The diagram illustrates how organizational change provokes resistance as a natural counterforce. Instead

Table 2

Framework for Channeling Resistance Energy

Step	Core Action	Managerial Focus	Expected Effect
Recognize	Legitimize resistance as natural	Normalize opposition, frame it as commitment	Resistance becomes visible, not hidden
Surface	Make resistance explicit	Dialogue, safe forums	Latent energy becomes accessible
Redirect	Channel energy constructively	Co-design, pilots, advocacy	Opposition converted into contribution
Align	Integrate into new identity	Embed values into change narrative	Resistance energy sustains transformation

Source: developed by the authors

of treating this resistance as obstruction, the process reframes it as energy to be channeled. The four-step loop — Recognize, Surface, Redirect, Align — encircles resistance, ensuring that its intensity is not suppressed but processed. The outcome is amplified momentum, represented as Change (+). In this way, resistance is not external to change but integral to it: what opposes transformation can, when disciplined, provide the energy that sustains it.

Implications. The reframing of resistance as energy carries significant implications.

For theory, it extends resistance research beyond obstacle or feedback. It highlights resistance as embodied energy, rooted in identity and values, and capable of sustaining change. It also demonstrates the utility of embodied metaphors in organizational theory. Physics clarifies inevitability, martial arts clarifies usability. Together with identity and paradox theory, they form a multidimensional model of resistance as energy.

For practice, the implication is direct. Leaders must expect resistance. Its absence signals superficial change. Legitimation allows resistance to surface; redirection channels it into contribution; alignment transforms it into sustaining commitment. The framework shifts managerial attention from defeating resistance to harnessing it.

For research, new questions open. How can resistance energy be measured? Under what conditions does it convert into momentum? How do leaders enact micro-practices of redirection in real time? Comparative and longitudinal studies could clarify the durability of change when resistance is harnessed rather than suppressed.

By repositioning resistance as energy, this paper bridges theory and practice. It challenges the assumption that resistance is a deficit and offers a model for turning it into resource.

Conclusion. Resistance has been treated for decades as the enemy of change. Even when acknowledged as complex, it is still framed as problem.

This paper advanced a different view: resistance is not only natural but necessary. It is both proof and fuel. It arises from identity, values, and routines that matter most, and therefore carries concentrated energy. Suppressed, it undermines change. Redirected, it sustains it.

The framework of Recognize, Surface, Redirect, Align offers a practical method for channeling this energy. Case illustrations across industries show how resistance that blocked initiatives was converted into advocacy once its underlying commitments were integrated.

The conclusion is sharp. Change without resistance is superficial. Resistance without change is inertia. Integrated, they generate momentum. The task of leadership is not to overcome resistance but to use it.

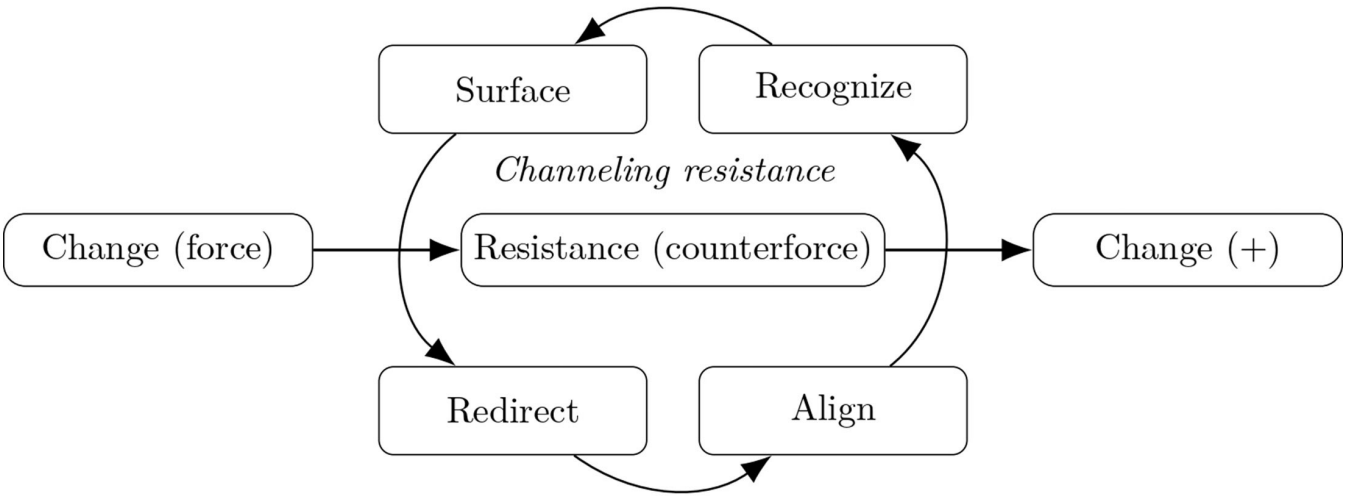

Fig. 1. Channeling resistance into amplified change

Source: developed by the authors

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