

Humans are always going to resist change, at least initially. This is why, according to a 2008 study by IBM, about 70% of change initiatives will fail.

Human beings' resistance to change is caused, in part at least, by a 200,000 year old legacy which is the human brain.

When humans first started to walk the earth, we were by no means top of the food chain. Every time we went out to get food, we could become food. The world back then was a dangerous place. In its attempts to keep us alive, the human brain developed a number of survival mechanisms. One of those survival mechanisms was a process known as error detection. Error detection was the ability to very accurately and very quickly pick up differences between what I expect to see in my environment and what I actually see in my environment.

So, if I am walking along the familiar grassy plains and I see a shape or shadow in front of me, I will stop. I have detected an error between what I expect to see and what I actually see.

My brain is now going to tell me "Wait! That could be a lion!"

In preparation for that, my brain will give me a very specific response known as the fight, flight or freeze whereby some very powerful chemicals are released into the body, altering the way the brain thinks, the way the body operates and the way we perceive the world. The interesting thing about the error detection mechanism is that it has what is known as a false positive bias. A false positive is when I say something will occur and it does not. **In the case of survival error detection, the reason we have a false positive bias is that the brain would much rather tell you that a lion is there and be wrong, over not telling you about a lion and being wrong.**

The same error detection that looked for change on the plains is still on the lookout today. When it detects change it can trigger fight, flight, or freeze. The fight, flight, freeze response that we go into when we detect a threat is a very, very powerful one and once we are in it, it is very hard to override. We all will have seen the effects of a flight, flight,

freeze response to change initiatives that our organisations are implementing. To the brain, change is dangerous – it does not matter whether it is a change in the grasslands or a change to the structure that I work in – my brain will respond the same way unless certain things occur.

There is another interesting thing about the 200,000 year old human brain; it is social. The reason that the human brain is social is very simple. Compared to the other animals around us, human beings were a little underdone. We are not that strong, we are not that fast, we do not have any natural armour, no natural weaponry, no claws, no fangs, no teeth, no venom – but what we did get is a brain. And not just any brain. We got a social brain and by banding together, human beings were able to survive in their environment.

What human beings instinctively knew back then, and what is still hardwired into us today, is this: in the world I live, if I am alone, I am prey, but if I am with my tribe, I am a predator. Human beings naturally feel stronger in their tribes. They will always feel safer and more secure in any of their tribes where the tribe is strong and cohesive.

Knowing this is helpful because any time you are going to initiate a change in your organisation, be aware that people are going to go into a fight, flight, freeze response that will look like various things in the organisation. Often we try to remedy that with really good communication or a purpose. We would suggest to you that all those things are secondary to ensuring that, just before a change is being announced, you undertake a conscious program of making sure teams are strengthened through a deliberate process to make the teams more cohesive and more sure. This, more than any other intervention, will help ensure your change processes are effective.

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