

From Saboteurs to Change Management:

Investigating the Correlation between Workplace Behavior and Change Resistance

Brian Young and Ashley Dees*

In 1944, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) published the *Simple Sabotage Field Manual*, a guide for workplace saboteurs during World War II.¹ The manual describes targets of sabotage as those in which persons have “normal and inconspicuous access in ever day life,” the workplace being an ideal location for such behavior.² It also mentions that the opportunity for sabotage is often found in “faulty decisions,” “non-cooperative attitudes,” and by getting others to follow ones lead in such behaviors.³ It is further suggested that such behavior will “harass and demoralize enemy administrators.”⁴ Galford, Frisch, & Greene used the *Simple Sabotage Field Manual* to map the sabotage behaviors encouraged by the OSS manual to sabotage behaviors within the workplace in the book *Simple Sabotage*.⁵ Many of the sabotage behaviors appear to be related to a resistance to change in employees.

Change is a word that for most invokes at minimum a feeling of uncertainty and at most abject fear particularly in relation to the workplace. Change is frequently seen as “threatening, too complicated, harmful, confusing, painful, and unnecessary.”⁶ A few reasons for change resistance according to Dukic include protecting the status quo, the fear, and no clear vision.⁷ As such change and resistance to change have been studied a great deal and in numerous settings, however while there appears to be a great deal of assumed resistance to change among academic librarians very little of this has been validated through research. The research that does exist in relation of academic librarians and change mostly concentrates on changing technology and how libraries and librarians have to adapt to said changes (Adeyoyin, Imam, & Bello 2012;⁸ Nelson & Irwin 2014;⁹ Weiner 2003¹⁰). The current study attempts to serve as a starting point for resistance to change research within the area of academic librarianship and to determine academic librarians’ real opinions or feelings about change or resistance to change. Using Oreg’s Resistance to Change Scale, a scale that has been used and validated in studies such as Oreg,¹¹ Oreg, Nevo, Metzger, Leder, & Castro,¹² the authors set out to determine academic librarians’ resistance to change. Also of interest were some of the ways in which academic librarians might resist change or inadvertently sabotage change in the workplace.

Reasons for Change Resistance

Stanislao and Stanislao suggest that the reasons for resisting change differ between those with veto power and those without. For those with veto power, reasons for resistance included “inertia,” “fear of the unknown,” “inse-

* Brian Young is Research and Instruction Librarian and Assistant Professor at the University of Mississippi, bwy-oung@olemiss.edu; Ashley Dees is Research and Instruction Librarian and Assistant Professor at the University of Mississippi, aesorey@olemiss.edu

curity,” “ignorance,” “obsolescence,” “personality,” “resentment of criticism,” “participation,” “tact,” confidence,” and “timing.”¹³ For those without veto power, reasons for resistance included “surprise,” “limited information” on how they would be affected by the change, “lack of training,” “lack of real understanding,” “loss of status,” “peer pressure,” “loss of security,” “loss of known work group,” “personality conflicts,” and “timing.”¹⁴ They suggest however that management should work to facilitate participation, be tactful in their approach or in how they introduce the change, attempt to plant the idea of the change, or make sure that they show support for the change and the benefits of the change that it will help employees who are change resistant.¹⁵

Kanter, in the article *Ten reasons people resist change*, suggests many of the same reasons employees resist change as Stanislaw and Stanislaw: “uncertainty,” “surprise,” “concerns about competence or confidence,” and “past resentments” or personality issues.¹⁶ Kanter also lists additional lists “loss of control,” “everything seems different,” and the fear of more work as additional employee concerns.¹⁷

A survey of varying aged librarians found that librarians who were new to the profession were typically surprised by the resistance to change they encountered in their colleagues and library administrators.¹⁸ Some new librarians from the survey related this fear of change to the ages of their co-workers while others put it down to lengthy process or red tape that had compounded over time; other survey respondents felt resistance to change by colleagues was due to burn out.¹⁹

The present study also surveys librarians with a wide variety of age, supervisory roles, and years of experience. By using a validated resistance to change scale, the authors aim to better understand librarians’ perceptions of change. In addition, by also adding the sabotage dimension, the authors hope to explore connections between change resistance and workplace sabotage. As mentioned earlier, sabotage in this context is not necessarily purposeful but, instead, may come from seemingly benign behaviors.

Method

The sample for this study was obtained by distributing a survey through multiple library listservs whose audiences included academic librarians. Survey respondents were then limited to only academic librarians through a recruitment e-mail and a self-identifying question at the beginning of the survey. Two hundred sixty-five participants completed the entire survey. Partial survey responses were discarded.

Participants were asked to respond to three demographic questions: age, supervisory status, and years of experience. Age ranges were based on common views on generational identities (e.g., millennials are individuals born in or after 1981). Supervisory status was defined as either non-manager, manager of librarians, or administrator.

The majority of the non-demographic questions were taken from Oreg’s resistance-to-change (RTC) scale, which he validated through a series of studies and has been commonly used to measure participants’ dispositional resistance to change.²⁰ The scale consists of seventeen Likert questions with six potential choices, ranging from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (6). In this study, the scale’s Cronbach alpha was .873. The alphas for each subscale were above the acceptable level of .7: .795 (routine seeking), .790 (emotional response), .814 (short-term focus), and .741 (cognitive rigidity). Participants were coded as either being resistant to change (RTC score ≤ 3.99) or not resistant to change (RTC score ≥ 4.00). Once coded, the two groups’ responses to the second set of non-demographic questions (i.e., sabotage-based question set) could be compared. The remaining non-demographic questions were taken directly or derived from actions identified as sabotage behaviors in either the *Simple Sabotage Field Manual*, or from those identified in the book *Simple Sabotage*.

Discussion

The primary emphasis of the study was whether any significant differences existed between how librarians responded to change based on age, supervisory status, and years of library experience. Results suggest that being

older (see Table 1), having more supervisory responsibilities (see Table 2), and having more experience (see Table 3) correspond to a higher resistance to change.

	Resistance to Change	Routine Seeking	Emotional Response	Short-Term Focus	Cognitive Rigidity
35 or younger (n=70)	3.89	4.17	3.38	4.10	3.85
36-51 years old (n=103)	3.98	4.35	3.62	4.21	3.66
52-70 years old (n=90)	4.18	4.63	3.82	4.39	3.76
71-88 years old (n=2)	4.15	4.60	3.88	3.63	4.38
Total (n=265)	4.03	4.40	3.63	4.24	3.75

The discussion related to age omits the fourth group (71–88 years old) as it contained only two participants. As participants age, they become more resistant to change. The pattern remains consistent when looking at three of the four subscales. However, younger librarians are the most cognitively rigid group. Oreg used the Cognitive Rigidity factor to represent the “frequency and ease with which people change their minds.”²¹ The implication is that while younger librarians are open to changes in their workplace, they may also need more convincing when a new idea is introduced or a new service is implemented if it does not match their expectation of what is needed. The results are the same when looking at years of experience instead of age. The difference among groups’ cognitive rigidity would need to be explored further to determine why younger and less experienced librarians are more firm in their beliefs.

	Resistance to Change	Routine Seeking	Emotional Response	Short-Term Focus	Cognitive Rigidity
Non-Manager (n=177)	3.94	4.28	3.50	4.16	3.71
Manager (n=48)	4.10	4.53	3.72	4.25	3.79
Administration (n=40)	4.34	4.76	4.06	4.58	3.87
Total (n=265)	4.03	4.40	3.63	4.24	3.75

The overall resistance to change, as well as each subscale, increases as librarians gain supervisory roles. Of particular importance is that cognitive rigidity mirrors the other three subscales’ steady increase. With limited responses from managers and administrators compared to non-managers, it would be difficult to generalize findings. However, the implication is that people who are cognitively rigid are more likely to assume managerial or administrative roles. Or, perhaps, being in those positions shapes an individuals’ personality.

	Resistance to Change	Routine Seeking	Emotional Response	Short-Term Focus	Cognitive Rigidity
0-5 years (n=71)	3.96	4.25	3.49	4.17	3.85
6-14 years (n=83)	3.99	4.36	3.61	4.25	3.64
15-24 years (n=67)	4.01	4.43	3.57	4.21	3.74
25+ years (n=44)	4.24	4.67	3.98	4.39	3.80
Total (n=265)	4.03	4.40	3.63	4.24	3.75

The finding that individuals in managerial positions tend to be more resistant to change appears to be at odds with the findings of Dukic who found that those in “managerial positions” tended to have more positive perceptions of change (186).²² The questions from the Resistance to Change scale are all from the point of view of change being enacted upon the respondent, which could account for managers and administrators seeming resistant to change in this study while Dukic’s study showed a more positive perception of change.²³ Administrators, who are frequently the change agents within their libraries, may feel differently about change when the change is their idea versus when the change is driven from outside of the organization. It is also possible that those in supervisory positions can both express positive perceptions of change but still be subconsciously resistant to change. .

While the observations are not statistically significant, they suggest that dispositional resistance to change is inversely associated with sabotage behavior. In other words, participants in the study who are resistant to change are less likely to agree with statements or activities associated with simple workplace sabotage. Only one question did not follow this pattern: If I don’t agree with, or am uncomfortable with a previously made decision, I will bring it up at a later meeting (see Table 4).

	Participant Not Resistant to Change (RTC ≤ 3.99) n = 137	Participant Resistant to Change (RTC ≥ 4.00) n = 128	Total n = 265
It is important to have 5 or more people on a library committee	4.18	4.40	4.29
I often wonder if my committee(s) should get approval from library administration before making a decision.	3.97	4.38	4.17
If I don’t agree with, or am uncomfortable with a previously made decision, I will bring it up at a later meeting.	3.20	3.06	3.14
New ideas should be discussed in committees before being implemented.	2.78	3.12	2.94
It is important to bring to the table similar but not quite related issues during meetings.	3.20	3.54	3.37
If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it is a good approach to evaluating library services.	4.16	5.03	4.58
I get supervisor approval for any task outside my immediate job duties.	4.01	4.52	4.26
In meetings, it is important to restate my point in several ways to ensure everyone understands.	3.88	4.13	4.00
There are established processes for a reason. They should not be questioned.	4.78	5.30	5.03

Librarians, regardless of their levels of change resistance, tend to refrain from simple sabotage in the workplace. Overall, participants only agreed more often than not with three sabotage questions. Librarians who participated believe that new ideas should be discussed in committees before being implemented (mean score = 2.94). Committee discussions should not necessarily be avoided, but the OSS did encourage saboteurs to refer all issues to committee for “further study and consideration”. In short, committees with clear direction and objectives remain valuable for building consensus and providing input but can become sabotaging if their work does not lead to action or implementation.

Librarians also seem to believe it is important to bring up previously made decisions if they feel uncomfortable or do not agree with it (mean score = 3.14). Saboteurs were encouraged to frequently reference and discuss matters previously decided. The extent of sabotage depends on the reasons why librarians want to revisit the decision. However, it is important that all librarians—authors included—consider the value of revisiting and vocalize opinions before a decision is made.

Moreover, participants believe it is important to discuss similar, but not quite related, issues during a meeting (mean score = 3.37). Like the previous two, this is not an obvious sabotage behavior. And often, it is not one at all. However, small tangents, especially when they lead to other small tangents, can derail conversation and move focus away from the intended discussion. Also like the other two behaviors, librarians should be aware of how their tangential comments may impact the overall meeting and ensure that they add value to the current discussion.

	Non-Manager (n=177)	Manager (n=48)	Administrator (n=40)
It is important to have 5 or more people on a library committee	4.19	4.35	4.63
I often wonder if my committee(s) should get approval from library administration before making a decision.	4.07	4.44	4.28
If I don't agree with, or am uncomfortable with a previously made decision, I will bring it up at a later meeting.	3.09	3.15	3.33
New ideas should be discussed in committees before being implemented.	2.82	2.98	3.43
It is important to bring to the table similar but not quite related issues during meetings.	3.23	3.52	3.80
If it ain't broke, don't fix it is a good approach to evaluating library services.	4.40	4.63	5.35
I get supervisor approval for any task outside my immediate job duties.	4.15	4.46	4.50
In meetings, it is important to restate my point in several ways to ensure everyone understands.	3.95	4.23	3.95
There are established processes for a reason. They should not be questioned.	4.92	5.19	5.38

Sabotage questions were then analyzed based on participants' demographics. Reviewing the data based on age and years of experience did not yield any notable observations. That is, there was no discernable pattern between how participants within a subgroup answered all of the sabotage questions compared to other subgroups (e.g., for roughly half of the sabotage questions, librarians with 0–5 years of experience agreed with the statement at a higher rate than more experienced librarians). That was not the case, though, when looking at the sabotage data based on supervisory status (see Table 5).

For almost all questions, administrators agreed less often than managers and non-managers with statements associated with sabotage behavior. In fact, only one question did not follow this pattern: I often wonder if my committee(s) should get approval from library administration before making a decision. The question, however, was poorly worded for administrators who do in fact work in library administration. The authors cannot be confident about whether administrators responded based on university administrators approving the participants' committee decisions, or if the administrators responded based on how library committees should operate.

The findings, though inconclusive, imply that administrators exhibit sabotage behaviors less often than other library employees.

Conclusion

This study has shown that someone who is resistant to change is not by default a saboteur. This is particularly true when looking at the responses of administrators who were consistently more resistant to change but also less likely to engage in sabotaging behavior. Librarians, regardless of their levels of change resistance, though, tended to support saboteur behaviors (i.e., mean scores for a sabotage question was less than four). However, future research should investigate deeper those questions where librarians did view sabotage behavior favorably. Additionally, the authors did not include all sabotage behaviors from the OSS manual in the present study.

The current study presented findings based on participants' overall scores on the RTC scale and its subscales. Analysis at that level suggested age has a role in perceptions towards change regardless of supervisory status. However, younger managers (n=5) responded with higher degrees of resistance on four questions: (1) If my boss changed the criteria for evaluating employees, it would probably make me feel uncomfortable even if I thought I'd do just as well without having to do any extra work; (2) I sometimes find myself avoiding changes that I know will be good for me; (3) When someone pressures me to change something, I tend to resist it even if I think the change may ultimately benefit me; and (4) My views are consistent over time.

Due to sample size, this may not be relevant, but it does raise the question as to how younger managers' views on change compare to their younger and managerial counterparts. The authors suggest two approaches that can be taken to investigate this phenomenon further: repeat the present study using a purposive sample that targets managers across all three age groups represented or use qualitative analysis to better understand the reasons behind younger managers' responses to those four statements.

Overall, librarians in the survey are rather neutral in regards to change resistance (mean = 4.03) but vary when looking at the subscales. Additionally, this study did not attempt to categorize librarians based on their function (e.g., technical services or public services). Future research should investigate specific subscales more extensively or investigate whether an individual's departmental choice corresponds with degree of change resistance.

APPENDIX The Dispositional Resistance to Change Scale—Oreg (2003)	
Routine seeking	1. I generally consider changes to be a negative thing.
	2. I'll take a routine day over a day full of unexpected events any time
	3. I like to do the same old things rather than try new and different ones.
	4. Whenever my life forms a stable routine, I look for ways to change it. (note: item reverse coded)
	5. I'd rather be bored than surprised
Emotional reaction	6. If I were to be informed that there's going to be a significant change regarding the way things are done at work, I would probably feel stressed.
	7. When I am informed of a change of plans, I tense up a bit.
	8. When things don't go according to plans, it stresses me out
	9. If one of my bosses changed the performance evaluation criteria, it would probably make me feel uncomfortable even if I thought I'd do just as well without having to do any extra work.
Short-term focus	10. Changing plans seems like a real hassle to me.
	11. Often, I feel a bit uncomfortable even about changes that may potentially improve my life
	12. When someone pressures me to change something, I tend to resist it even if I think the change may ultimately benefit me.
	13. I sometimes find myself avoiding changes that I now will be good for me.
Cognitive rigidity	14. I often change my mind (note: reverse coded)
	15. I don't change my mind easily.
	16. Once I've come to a conclusion, I'm not likely to change my mind.
	17. My views are very consistent over time.

Notes

1. *Simple Sabotage Field Manual: Strategic Services Field Manual No. 3.* (Office of Strategic Services, 1944).
2. *Ibid.*, 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 2.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Robert M. Galford, Bob Frisch, and Cary Greene, *Simple sabotage: A modern field manual for detecting and rooting out everyday behaviors that undermine your workplace* (New York: HarperOne, 2015).
6. Gordana Dukic, "Perception and adoption of change management in information institutions: A study from Croatia," *Libri* 65 no. 3 (2015): 177.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Samuel Olu Adeyoyin, Abayomi Imam, and Taofik Olatunde Bello, "Management of Change in the 21st Century Libraries and Information Centres," *Library Philosophy and Practice* (2011): paper 695.
9. Andrew Nelson and Jennifer Irwin, "Defining what we do—All over again": Occupational identity, technological change, and the librarian/internet-search relationship," *Academy of Management Journal* 57 no. 3 (2014): 892–982.
10. Sharon Gray Weiner, "Resistance to change in libraries: Application of communication theories," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* (2003): 69–78.
11. Shaul Oreg, "Resistance to change: Developing an individual differences measure," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 88 no. 4 (2003): 680–693.
12. Shaul Ored, Ofra Nevo, Hila Metzer, Naftali Leder, and Dotan Castro, "Dispositional resistance to change and occupational interests and choices," *Journal of Career Assessment* 17 no. 3 (2009): 312–323.
13. Joseph Stanislaw and Bettie C. Stanislaw, "Dealing with resistance to change," *Business Horizons* July-August (1983): 77.
14. *Ibid.*, 75–78.

15. Ibid, 77–78.
16. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, “Ten reasons people resist change,” *Harvard Business Review*, September 25, 2012, <https://hbr.org/2012/09/ten-reasons-people-resist-change>.
17. Ibid.
18. Rachel Singer Gordon, *The NextGen Librarian’s Survival Guide* (Medford: Information Today, Inc., 2006), 69.
19. Ibid, 70.
20. Oreg, “Resistance to change.”
21. Ibid, 682.
22. Dukic, “Perception and adoption of change management,” 182.
23. Ibid, 182.