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LEVERAGING CLIENT ORGANIZATIONS' INTERNAL RESISTANCE TO CHANGE TO ENHANCE CONSULTING PROJECT OUTCOMES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

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Abstract

This study examines how consultants can leverage organizational resistance to change to improve project outcomes, with a focus on the strategy and implementation phases. Using a qualitative approach, interviews with consulting professionals were conducted to examine forms and sources of resistance to change, coping strategies, and challenges associated with leveraging resistance to change. The findings underscore the value of leveraging resistance as feedback and highlight the importance of tailored communication, trust-building, and stakeholder participation. The study bridges theoretical insights with practical experiences, offering tangible recommendations for consultants to leverage resistance to change for better outcomes in consulting projects.

Keywords

consulting, resistance to change, organizational change, transformation, project outcome, strategy, implementation

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1. Introduction

The consulting industry, valued at nearly $1.8 trillion in 2023, is a key driver for the global economy (Bohne 2024a), driving transformation across nearly every sector, from healthcare to technology and manufacturing. As one of the fastest-growing professional services sectors, consultancies play a vital role as change agents, guiding organizations through complex challenges (Armbrüster 2006; Cerruti, Tavoletti, and Grieco 2019).

Despite the extensive literature on client-consultant relationships, change management, and organizational transformation, resistance in organizations remains a significant barrier to successful project outcomes. It contributes to delays, cost increases, and wasted resources, or even change failure (Warrick 2023; Furxhi 2021). Consultants, due to their central role in change initiatives, often face resistance to change and therefore must understand its sources and strategies to address it effectively. Growing skepticism toward consulting has led researchers to question its value and examine resistance to change within client-consultant dynamics (Nikolova and Devinney 2007). Although research addresses coping strategies for resistance to change, much of this literature generalizes these approaches, lacking a focus on how resistance might be leveraged during different project phases of consulting projects. Understanding the unique dynamics of resistance to change in the strategy and implementation phase presents an opportunity to refine consulting practices and improve project outcomes.

This research seeks to expand on this foundation by addressing the question: *"How can consulting firms leverage client organizations' internal resistance to change to enhance project outcomes?"*. It builds on (1) established academic research and (2) qualitative interviews with consulting professionals experienced in coping with resistance to change. The study aims to offer an examination of how resistance to change manifests in the strategy and implementation phase, with a focus on how consultants can leverage this resistance to enhance project outcomes. By bridging theoretical insights with practical experiences, this research aspires to advance the consulting industry's approach to leveraging resistance to change effectively.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction to Organizational Resistance to Change

Organizational resistance to change is a key determinant influencing the success of change outcomes, requiring careful consideration in any change process and phase (Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003; Waddell and Sohal 1998). This concept also applies to resistance to change within consulting projects (Mosonyi, Empson, and Gond 2020).

2.1.1. Defining Organizational Resistance to Change

Resistance in organizations broadly describes how individuals or groups within an organization oppose or challenge any manifestation of power (Mumby et al. 2017). In contrast, **organizational resistance to change** manifests specifically in response to initiatives to alter the status quo of the organization, such as administrative, structural, or technological changes (Dent and Goldberg 2013; Furxhi 2021). These two concepts must be distinguished, as their sources and implications differ.

Contemporary scholars recognize organizational resistance to change as a multi-faceted phenomenon, with two predominant understandings conceptualized in literature (Mumby et al. 2017; Thomas and Hardy 2011; Waddell and Sohal 1998): Traditionally, resistance to change is seen as a **defensive, intentional response to change**, aimed at preserving the status quo within organizations. This perspective frames resistance to change as an obstacle to be overcome (Badham and Santiago 2023; Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003). In contrast, a more contemporary perspective emphasizes the utility of resistance to change. Organizational resistance to change is seen as a **valuable resource** and feedback mechanism that, if utilized effectively, can benefit change outcomes (Dent and Goldberg 2013; L. W. Ford and Ford 2009; Oreg et al. 2018).

Despite their widespread acceptance in literature, both perspectives have limitations. Thomas & Hardy (2011) argue that simply demonizing or celebrating resistance to change can overlook the **critical role of power dynamics of resistance in organizations**, as both definitions primarily focus on the views of change agents. They suggest that a more holistic understanding of resistance requires multiple perspectives, including those of change recipients, to capture the complexity of power relations in organizational change. Thus, the approach integrates the concept of resistance in organizations and resistance to change, considering the role of power and the problem of change. It complements the view of celebrating and leveraging resistance to change in that it allows circumstances where resistance is constructive, leading to more successful organizational change.

While organizational resistance broadly captures resistance within an organization's structure, the study will refer specifically to organizational resistance to change that arises in consulting projects, focusing on leveraging the resistance, while considering power dynamics.

2.1.2. Identifying Sources of Resistance to Change

Characterizing resistance to change requires understanding its underlying sources (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008). George and Jones (2012) identify a comprehensive categorization of sources at three levels:

At the **individual** level, resistance to change for example arises from uncertainty, selective perception, or habits (George and Jones 2012). The individual's response varies depending on an individual's general attitude toward change, such as an aversion to it, and the specific characteristics of the change initiative (Warrick 2023). Moreover, at the individual level, resistance to change is predominantly driven by rational, non-rational, and political social factors (Waddell and Sohal 1998). Kotter and Schlesinger (2008) find that the four most common individual sources are the change recipients' self-interest, their misunderstanding or lack of trust in the organizational change, a different evaluation of the change from the change agent, and a personal, low tolerance for change. On a **group** level, resistance to change can stem from prevalent norms and cohesiveness. At the **organizational** level, differences in power dynamics, conflicting objectives, or organizational culture can be significant internal triggers (George and Jones 2012; Furxhi 2021). These are complemented by external sources of resistance to change, such as market developments, technological progress, or activities from competitors (Warrick 2023; Furxhi 2021).

However, the sources of resistance to change are **specific to the context** of an organizational change or transformation, such as the stakeholders or phase of the change. In a client-consultant relationship, differences in the change agents' and recipients' motivations may lead to organizational resistance. For example, consultants may be more interested in creating long-term client dependency or providing quick fixes with standardized solutions than in acting in their client's best interests (Nikolova and Devinney 2007).

2.1.3. Exploring Forms of Resistance to Change

The phenomenon of resistance in organizations can then manifest in various forms, ranging from **passive behaviors** such as subtle indifference, disinterest, or non-compliance to more **active expressions**, such as voicing strong opposing views or engaging in acts of sabotage (L. W. Ford & Ford, 2009; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2009; Pardo Del Val & Martínez Fuentes, 2003).

Mumby et al. (2017) categorize this broad spectrum of behaviors, based on whether resistance in organizations is expressed **individually or collectively**, and whether it is **visible or covert**. They frame these categories in a four-category matrix, that can be applied to resistance to change in consulting projects: The first form of resistance - individual infrapolitics - depicts individual behaviors that are covert, such as a client team member intentionally delaying responses to consultants' requests to slow down a change initiative. In contrast, collective infrapolitics describes subtle organizational resistance to change through group efforts, such as a team within the client organization that collectively chooses to maintain established practices instead of the consultants' proposed tactics. Furthermore, individuals may openly demonstrate resistance to proposed changes, which is characterized as disobedience. This can occur in project team meetings, where consultants present new approaches, and a client manager may openly oppose the consultant's recommendation, challenging the rationale behind the approach and creating uncertainty about the organizational change (L. W. Ford and Ford 2009). The fourth form of resistance to change – insurrection - covers visible behaviors of groups within organizations and can for example manifest as an open employee protest against the implementation of a technological transformation.

Oreg et al. (2018) provide an additional perspective on manifestations of resistance, by focusing specifically on responses to change initiatives. They categorize change recipients' behavioral responses into four types: **change resistance, disengagement, proactivity, and acceptance**. Each behavior of the change recipients is tied to its underlying core affect. Change resistance, for example, is described as a highly activated change reaction, with negative valence, covering emotions from stress to anger. In contrast, change acceptance and change proactivity are positively valanced, characterized by calm or even enthusiastic emotions.

These specific forms as well as the sources of resistance to change must be correctly identified by the consulting team, as they determine the optimal strategies to cope with resistant behaviors to achieve the best change outcomes (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008).

2.1.4. Conceptualizing Resistance to Change in Relation to Power

Power dynamics are central to the relationship between resistance and organizational change, as resistance is inherently linked to power (Foucault 1980). Thus, they must be considered when framing resistance to change, as described in *Chapter 2.1.1.*

In consulting projects, these dynamics are particularly noticeable due to the **nature of the consultant-client relationship** (Nikolova and Devinney 2009; Cerruti, Tavoletti, and Grieco 2019). Power and resistance to change are often described as a bidirectional relationship, with consultants acting as change agents and clients as change recipients. The consultant is predominantly depicted as more powerful, holding expert power through the superiority of knowledge, even though economic power rests with the client in a buyer's market (Armbrüster 2006; Mosonyi, Empson, and Gond 2020; Nikolova and Devinney 2007).

However, the power-resistance relationship in consulting projects can be more complex than this duality suggests. Thomas & Hardy (2011) argue that the relationship, in fact, manifests in a complex network, involving multiple power dynamics among various stakeholders. In a consulting project, these dynamics might involve project sponsors, consulting partners, project managers, and team members from both the client and consulting sides (Nikolova and Devinney 2009; Schein 1997). This web of power interaction creates an environment, where power and resistance to change are fluid.

Power hierarchies in consulting also influence responsibilities and responses to resistance to change. Consulting teams typically operate within temporary hierarchical structures with clearly defined roles and responsibilities enforced by project managers (Mosonyi, Empson, and Gond 2020; Nikolova and Devinney 2007). As a result, resistance often manifests in operational teams or individuals, who might push back against changes proposed by consultants. Passive forms of resistance to change, like withholding information or delaying responses, are commonly encountered at this level and typically managed within the team. However, more active forms, such as sabotage, often escalate up the hierarchy, involving senior consultants or project leaders to address the issue formally (Nikolova and Devinney 2009).

Understanding these power dynamics in consulting can enable consultants to anticipate, interpret, and strategically address organizational resistance to change in projects. Nevertheless, the power dynamics are determined by several factors, including the client's level of knowledge, the complexity and significance of the project, and the personality traits of the sponsor and consulting partner (Nikolova and Devinney 2009). Moreover, the specific sources and forms of organizational resistance to change vary significantly between different phases of consulting projects, as each phase introduces distinct power dynamics and organizational impacts.

2.2. Introduction to Phases of Consulting Projects: Strategy and Implementation

Resistance to change within consulting projects is inherently complex and requires a clear understanding of the different phases that characterize such initiatives. Consulting projects typically unfold in two key phases: the **strategy phase** and the **implementation phase**. Understanding these phases in detail provides the basis for addressing the different forms of resistance that arise and highlights the need for tailored strategies.

2.2.1. Overview of Consulting Phases and Frameworks

The **strategy phase** involves a thorough analysis of the client's needs, the identification of clear project objectives and the development of a strategic plan (Poulfelt and Olson 2018). Consultants often introduce innovative concepts and frameworks that challenge the client's status quo and assess how these changes will affect the client's role and the wider organizational landscape (Nissen 2018). This approach is essential for ensuring that organizations can adapt to environmental changes and proactively develop strategies for long-term success (Grünig, Kühn, and Morschett 2022; Nissen 2018). For this analysis, consultants often use frameworks such as **SWOT** (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis to structure the strategic plan and identify strengths as well as areas for improvement (Aron and Minsky 2021). Another common framework is **Porter's Five Forces** Model, which is often used to assess competitive positioning, helping organizations to make strategic decisions based on external market forces (Porter 2008). However, cognitive biases and existing power dynamics within the client organization can pose significant challenges in the strategy phase (Rumelt 1995; Thomas and Hardy 2011).

The **implementation phase** is the phase in which the theoretical plans of the strategy phase are translated into practical actions. Often new technologies, processes, or organizational structures are introduced, which may disrupt established workflows and personal routines (Grünig, Kühn, and Morschett 2022). There are several implementation frameworks, such as **Kotter's 8-step change model**, which is widely used to guide organizations through the transition by creating urgency, building coalitions, empowering a vision, and institutionalizing change (Kotter 1996). In addition, the **ADKAR** model (Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement) focuses on individual readiness for change to ensure smooth implementation (Hiatt 2006). Resistance in the implementation phase is often intensified by concerns about the impact of these changes on day-to-day operations and perceived threats to employees' established routines and roles (Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003).

While these frameworks provide a structured approach to strategy development and execution, resistance to change remains a recurring challenge that can significantly impact both phases.

2.2.2. Resistance to Change across Phases

Consulting firms frequently act as change agents for client organizations in transformations across both public and private sectors, a role well-established in the literature (Cerruti, Tavoletti, and Grieco 2019). Due to the central role in change initiatives, consultancies often face resistance to change within projects. The sources and forms of resistance to change, as outlined in *Chapters 2.1.2* and *2.1.3*, may vary across different project phases of a consulting project. Although the literature does not comprehensively address these variations in consulting projects, a few scholars highlight distinctions between resistance encountered during the strategy phase and the implementation phase of organizations, which can be applied to consulting projects (Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003).

In the **strategy phase**, resistance to change may manifest itself as cognitive barriers, where skepticism about the relevance or feasibility of proposed changes arises due to "distorted perceptions, interpretation barriers and vague strategic priorities" (Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003, p. 149). This resistance can be influenced by factors such as myopia, denial, and the persistence of entrenched ideas that limit openness to strategic change (Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003). A mismatch between consultants' recommendations and clients' perceived needs can also lead to doubt or rejection of new proposals (Sturdy, Wright, and Wylie 2015). Organizational silence (Morrison and Milliken 2000) and communication barriers (Hutt, Walker, and Frankwick 1995) may increase organizational resistance to change as stakeholders may avoid voicing concerns, which reinforces the status quo through unexamined beliefs (Morrison and Milliken 2000). In addition to these structural and psychological barriers, low motivation for change may further hinder progress during the strategy phase (Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003). Specific factors driving this lack of motivation include the direct costs associated with change (Rumelt 1995), a history of past failures that fosters pessimism (Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003), and conflicting interests between employees and management (Waddell and Sohal 1998). According to Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes (2003), resistance to change can also arise from a lack of creative responses, driven by rapid and complex environmental changes (Rumelt 1995) and a deficiency in strategic vision or strong commitment from top management (Rumelt 1995; Waddell and Sohal 1998).

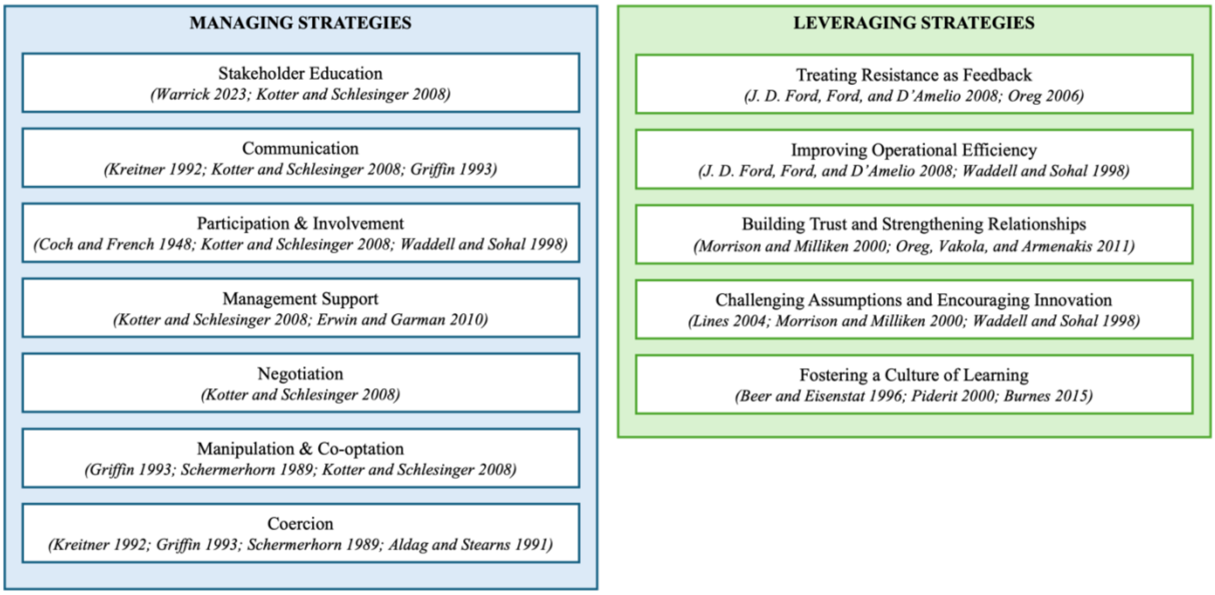
In the **implementation phase**, political and cultural deadlocks, as described by Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes (2003), including factors such as the implementation climate (Klein and Sorra 1996), deep-rooted disagreements among groups on the nature of the problem (Krüger 1996), and departmental politics (Beer and Eisenstat 1996; Rumelt 1995), may create barriers to change. Routine and collective action problems add to this, as employees may lack the necessary skills, creating a capability gap that increases resistance to change (Rumelt 1995). Leadership inaction may intensify these problems, with a lack of visible support reducing trust and motivation (Beer and Eisenstat 1996). Cynicism from past failures further undermines change efforts, as skepticism arises from previous unsuccessful initiatives (Reichers, Wanous, and Austin 1997). Holt, Armenakis, Feild und Harris (2007) emphasize that these psychological and cultural barriers need to be addressed in order to foster readiness for change.

In summary, resistance to change is complex, with cognitive biases influencing strategy development and political, cultural, and operational factors influencing implementation, leading many to view change as disruptive rather than beneficial (Waddell and Sohal 1998)

2.3. How Consultants Can Cope with Resistance to Change

Strategies for coping with resistance to change are essential for achieving successful project outcomes in consulting. As discussed in *Chapter 2.1.1*, resistance is often viewed as either an obstacle to overcome or a resource to utilize. Building on this distinction, the literature identifies two key strategies for coping with resistance to change, depicted in Figure I.

Figure I: Strategies for Managing and Leveraging Resistance to Change in Organizational Literature



Managing resistance to change approaches it as a challenge, focusing on mitigating, dealing with, or overcoming resistance to ensure the smooth progress of the change process (Warrick 2023; Kotter and Schlesinger 2008; Waddell and Sohal 1998). In contrast, **leveraging resistance** focuses on strategies to utilize resistance as a resource to improve change outcomes (Waddell and Sohal 1998; Thomas and Hardy 2011; Lines 2004; J. D. Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio 2008). Both strategies are applicable across the phases of consulting projects.

2.3.1. Managing Resistance to Change

In the literature, managing resistance to change is widely discussed, with seven commonly identified strategies that offer targeted approaches to address various forms of resistance to change during transformations (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008; Dent and Goldberg 2013).

Proactive stakeholder education is fundamental to managing resistance (Warrick 2023; Kotter and Schlesinger 2008). Various **communication methods** such as one-on-one meetings, group presentations, and detailed reports help stakeholders understand the need for and rationale behind proposed changes (Kreitner 1992; Kotter and Schlesinger 2008; Griffin 1993). Warrick (2023) emphasizes that clear and transparent communication builds trust and reduces resistance by demonstrating the practicality and relevance of the changes.

Participatory approaches also play a critical role by involving employees in the decision-making process and by involving potential resisters in the design and implementation of change (Coch and French 1948; Kotter and Schlesinger 2008; Waddell and Sohal 1998). This involvement may not only elicit valuable feedback from those affected but also increase their commitment, thereby easing the transformation process.

In addition, **management support** can be essential to reinforce these efforts. Providing training for new skills, emotional support, or time off after periods of intense work enables employees to adapt smoothly to change (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008). Visible and consistent support from senior management not only signals a unified commitment to the change but also emphasizes its importance and fosters trust and cooperation (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008; Erwin and Garman 2010).

Negotiation strategies can further help to overcome resistance to change by offering incentives, such as improved pay or enhanced retirement benefits, for compliance with new work rules or early retirement plans (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008). More subtle tactics such as **manipulation and co-optation** involve selectively sharing information or integrating leaders of resistant groups into the change effort to discreetly shift perceptions (Kreitner 1992; Griffin 1993; Schermerhorn 1989; Kotter and Schlesinger 2008; Aldag and Stearns 1991). In addition, these tactics often intersect with negotiation strategies that include implicit promises of future benefits, such as promotions or raises, to gain support for the change (Kreitner 1992; Griffin 1993; Schermerhorn 1989; Aldag and Stearns 1991). While these methods can be effective in securing buy-in, they should be used carefully, with attention to ethical concerns and the importance of maintaining transparency.

In urgent situations where changes must be implemented quickly and are likely to be unpopular, **coercion** may be necessary (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008). This management approach, which uses the threat of job loss or other career consequences to enforce compliance, is generally considered a last resort because of the strong resentment it tends to provoke (Kreitner 1992; Griffin 1993; Schermerhorn 1989; Aldag and Stearns 1991). It should be used with care and transparency, reserved only for scenarios where other strategies have proven ineffective.

In summary, managing resistance to change requires a thoughtful blend of educational, participatory, supportive, and sometimes coercive strategies. Consultants can play a critical role in effectively applying these strategies, tailoring them to the unique cultural and operational dynamics of each client organization, and ensuring that each strategy is implemented with sensitivity to the specific context and challenges facing the client.

2.3.2. Leveraging Resistance to Change

In addition to the management strategies, five common approaches to leveraging resistance to change as a resource can be found in the literature.

Firstly, **treating resistance to change as feedback** can provide critical insights into organizational culture, values, and potential risks (J. D. Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio 2008). This approach allows consultants and stakeholders to explore and refine the rationale behind proposed changes, ensuring that strategies are aligned with organizational needs (Oreg 2006).

For instance, actively managing skepticism may encourage deeper analysis and support the development of tailored solutions that address potential concerns (Lines 2004). Moreover, feedback can reveal overlooked inefficiencies or training needs, allowing for timely adjustments (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008; Vakola 2014). Similarly, Warrick (2022) highlights that resistant stakeholders may offer valuable input, and that exploring resistance can help fine-tune initiatives to prevent negative outcomes and promote positive ones. Thus, change agents may use this feedback to improve the quality of change initiatives in the long term and turn resistance into a resource for growth and adaptation (J. D. Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio 2008).

Resistance to change can play a crucial role in **enhancing operational efficiency** by drawing attention to aspects of proposed changes that may be inappropriate, poorly planned, or misaligned with organizational realities (Waddell and Sohal 1998). Adjusting the pace, project scope, or sequence of change based on these insights ensures smoother implementation and better alignment with business needs, ultimately streamlining operations and reducing inefficiencies (J. D. Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio 2008). Early identification of such issues ensures that implementation plans are better aligned with operational realities and reduces the likelihood of disruption (Kotter 1996).

Furthermore, **building trust and strengthening relationships** is essential to leverage resistance to change (Vakola 2014). A supportive environment and trustworthy management significantly influence the receptiveness of change recipients, fostering positive emotions and cooperative behavior during change initiatives (Oreg, Vakola, and Armenakis 2011). In particular, the creation of safe spaces for stakeholders enables them to voice concerns and contribute unconventional ideas to enhance the quality and creativity of proposed solutions (Morrison and Milliken 2000; Warrick 2023). Additionally, strong social support networks and respect within teams help reduce emotional exhaustion and promote constructive engagement with change initiatives (Oreg, Vakola, and Armenakis 2011).

Moreover, **innovation may be encouraged through resistance to change**, as existing assumptions are challenged, and consultants are encouraged to explore alternative solutions (Lines 2004). It injects energy into the change process, driving stakeholders to synthesize conflicting opinions and explore diverse possibilities (Waddell and Sohal 1998). Morrison and Milliken (2000) emphasize that innovation thrives in an environment where individuals feel free to challenge established beliefs and practices, offering new perspectives that improve the quality of decision-making. In addition, several papers discuss that resistance to change provides an opportunity to foster **a culture of learning**. Resistance, when framed as an opportunity for growth, transforms reluctance into motivation for improvement and creates an environment where learning is valued and celebrated. This approach not only enhances individual competencies, but also promotes organizational agility, prepares the workforce for future change, and drives sustainable growth (Beer and Eisenstat 1996; Piderit 2000; Burnes 2015).

In summary, the literature highlights strategies that extend beyond merely managing resistance to change. Leveraging resistance as a resource can refine strategies, improve operational efficiency, foster innovation, and ultimately enhance project outcomes. Consultants can apply these strategies to create more effective change initiatives in consulting projects.

2.3.3. Challenges in Leveraging Resistance to Change

While leveraging resistance to change can present valuable opportunities, several challenges and barriers can hinder the effective use of leveraging strategies, introduced in *Chapter 2.3.2*. A key issue is the **misinterpretation of resistance** as outright opposition, which prevents organizations and consultants from recognizing it as valuable feedback and instead frames it as a problem to be eliminated (J. D. Ford, Ford, and D’Amelio 2008). This tendency, as highlighted by Warrick (2022), is particularly evident among change agents, who often dismiss resistance rather than viewing it as a potential source of insight. Coupled with the power dynamics outlined by Thomas and Hardy (2011), this perspective privileges change agents in labeling and interpreting resistance, leading to the dismissal of valid concerns or alternative ideas. As a result, opportunities for productive dialogue, co-creation of solutions, and effectively leveraging resistance to change are often lost.

In addition, **cultural norms and long-held values** can be barriers; resistance often arises from a clash between established organizational culture and the goals of change, especially in organizations with rigid or risk-averse mindsets (Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003).

Miscommunication or misalignment between proposed changes and organizational realities can amplify resistance to change (Furxhi 2021). Grünig, Kühn und Morschett (2022) notes that unrealistic timelines or inadequate resources often disconnect change initiatives from day-to-day operations, making resistance more difficult to overcome. Similarly, Kotter (1996) emphasizes that unclear communication and poor alignment lead to confusion and mistrust, intensifying resistance to change. **External pressures**, such as market volatility or legislative changes, add to resistance by increasing internal anxiety (Gilgeous and Chambers 1999; Hiatt 2006). Kotter (1996) highlights the dual effect of these pressures: they may create a sense of urgency for change while making stakeholder engagement more difficult. Grünig, Kühn und Morschett (2022) adds that failure to address these dynamics can undermine the success of project efforts.

Together, these challenges complicate the process of leveraging resistance and limit its potential to enhance organizational change initiatives and create meaningful organizational improvements. For consultants, overcoming these barriers requires a delicate balance between understanding internal dynamics, aligning with organizational realities, and managing external pressures. In addition, consultants must cultivate a positive relationship with resistance, viewing it as a valuable source of insight rather than an obstacle, and develop the skills necessary to engage with and channel resistance constructively.

3. Research Methodology

This study aims to provide **practical recommendations for consultants** on how resistance to change can be effectively leveraged in different consulting phases. While existing literature offers valuable perspectives on resistance to change, it often adopts broad, uniform approaches and does not fully explore resistance to change during specific project phases, such as strategy and implementation. Building on these foundational studies, this research seeks to enhance understanding of how resistance to change manifests in these phases and how it can be strategically leveraged by consultants to improve project outcomes.

Developing phase-specific recommendations for leveraging resistance to change requires identifying the similarities and differences between phases, including the sources, forms, and commonly used strategies to manage and utilize resistance. Insights from real-world projects are particularly valuable, especially those where consultants have encountered resistance to change during the strategy and implementation phases and applied different coping strategies.

To gather these insights, the study uses a **qualitative approach**, conducting semi-structured interviews with selected consulting professionals (Misoch 2019). The findings from these interviews will form the basis for understanding resistance to change across consulting phases and will be used to derive guidelines for consultants to leverage resistance to change.

3.1. Interviewees

In total, eleven consulting experts from six different consulting firms were interviewed. An overview of the interviewees can be found in *Appendix 1*.

3.1.1. Professional Background

Each interviewee has significant experience in either the strategy or implementation phase, or both, as well as direct client interaction in the context of a change project. Participants range from junior consultants to senior executives to offer comprehensive perspectives from strategic planning to hands-on implementation. This provides a well-rounded view of how resistance to change arises and is managed at different stages of a project. The participants were exclusively drawn from leading consulting firms, including the **Big Four**, such as EY, and consultancies with a strong focus on **strategy**, such as EY-Parthenon and Roland Berger, and **implementation**, such as Capgemini Invent, Accenture, and KPMG. This deliberate selection excluded smaller or newer consultancies and ensured high-quality insights grounded in industry knowledge and expertise in both strategy and implementation from well-established firms (Eggert and Laesser 2024). Additionally, some interviewees were chosen specifically for their advanced expertise in change management, further enriching the study with targeted insights.

3.1.2. Geographical Focus

All participants were selected from the **DACH region** (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland), due to the region's substantial consulting market size and the prevalence of consulting projects across various industries – with Germany alone reaching a market size of 35.7 billion in 2019 (Bohne 2024b). The geographical focus also minimizes cultural variability that might influence how organizational resistance to change manifests, is perceived, and is coped with (Gladden 2019). By concentrating on the culturally similar DACH area, this study ensures that notable differences in resistance manifestations and coping strategies are attributable to professional practices and not to cultural disparities.

3.1.3. Recruiting Process

Participants were primarily recruited through a combination of **professional networks**, including LinkedIn, and **word-of-mouth personal referrals**. Recruitment efforts leveraged existing connections and personal networks, such as former colleagues, contacts established during internships and employment, and individuals met at university career fairs or events. Consulting professionals introduced through personal relationships, such as friends or family, played a significant role. In addition, consulting professionals were contacted via LinkedIn and identified using search criteria such as "Strategy Consulting", "Implementation Consulting", and “Change Consulting”, with filters applied to target the DACH region and relevant consultancies. Despite these efforts, personal networks proved more effective in securing interviews than establishing new LinkedIn connections.

This recruiting approach not only provided access to motivated individuals with first-hand experience in coping with organizational resistance to change but also ensured that participants contributed relevant insights from their diverse roles across various consulting projects. Furthermore, each interviewee was encouraged to recommend additional professionals from their networks, helping to expand the pool of interviewees and enhance the depth of perspectives included in the study.

3.2. Interview Design

Building on the findings of the literature review and the research question, an interview guideline was developed to structure the qualitative data collection process. This guideline, included in *Appendix 2*, provides a framework for conducting the **semi-structured interviews.** These interviews are designed around **16 open-ended questions**, with back-up queries to dive deeper into participants’ responses. The interview is divided into five key parts: (1) opening and introduction, (2) personal and project background, (3) resistance to change in the strategy or implementation phase, (4) consultants’ responses, and (5) closing. The questions focus on participants’ experiences, including the roles in their projects, specific instances of resistance to change they encountered, and the strategies they used to either address or leverage that resistance to improve project outcomes. The semi-structured interview format allows for flexibility, enabling discussions to evolve naturally, bringing out unique challenges and emerging themes that enrich the depth and relevance of the data collected (Misoch 2019).

During the development process, AI tools were utilized to estimate interview durations. Moreover, the supervisor provided critical feedback, challenging the questions to ensure their quality and practical relevance. Initially planned for 60 minutes, the questions were streamlined to an estimated 30 to 45 minutes by focusing solely on the most impactful questions. Additionally, based on the feedback from the supervisor, the questions were rephrased to emphasize practical examples, further enhancing the clarity and applicability of the discussions.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were conducted **remotely via Microsoft Teams,** lasting between 31 and 55 minutes. In advance, interview questions were shared with participants to allow for preparation and reflection to encourage detailed and thoughtful responses. At the beginning of the interviews, the participants were encouraged to focus on one specific client project to draw their experiences from and to elaborate on them using specific examples and instances, to allow deeper insights into resistance to change. While eleven interviews were conducted, they were divided into two focus areas: five interviews focused on the strategy phase of consulting projects, and the other six interviews on the implementation phase. However, the participants were asked to draw comparisons and share insights and experiences across both phases, ensuring a holistic understanding of resistance to change in consulting projects. With the consent of the interviewees, the interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Teams' auto-transcription feature solely for the purpose of data analysis. However, due to corporate rules and client confidentiality, not all interviewees provided consent for transcription; in such cases, detailed notes were taken instead. The qualitative data analysis was conducted following the framework of Miles and Huberman (1994), using the software tool **MAXQDA** for thematic analysis. Transcripts and detailed meeting notes were uploaded into the software, where recurring themes were systematically coded, and the qualitative data was examined in depth (Gizzi and Rädiker 2021). The interview results are summarized in *Appendix 3* and *4*.

4. Diagnosis

Drawing on expert interviews, the diagnosis examines phase-specific characteristics of resistance to change, including its sources and forms, the coping strategies applied, and the associated challenges. The findings are first analyzed separately for each phase and compared to the literature review, followed by a comparative analysis of similarities and differences between the two phases. Finally, the diagnosis will be used to derive tangible recommendations for consultants as a solution to leverage resistance to change to enhance project outcomes.

4.1. Resistance to Change in the Strategy Phase

In the interviews, five consulting experts shared insights into resistance to change encountered during the strategy phase. The experts specializing in strategy have an average of 6.6 years of consulting experience (ranging from 2 to 10 years). Their projects, as summarized in Table I, span industries such as automotive, brewing, telecommunications, and healthcare, and provide the foundation for diagnosing how resistance manifests and is coped with in the strategy phase.

Table I: Project Overview – Strategy Phase

Expert	**Position**	**Experience** [in years]	**Project Description**
1	Senior Manager	10	Global HR transformation strategy development for a large-scale project in the automotive sector
2	Consultant	6	Strategy development technological transformation of a Bavarian brewery
3	Senior Manager	5	Global HR transformation strategy development for a large-scale project in the automotive sector
4	Manager	10	End-to-end PMO strategy development in the telecommunications sector
5	Junior Consultant	2	Strategy development for portfolio performance enhancement of a healthcare company under private equity management

4.1.1. How Resistance to Change Manifested in the Strategy Phase

During the strategy phase, the interviewees predominantly described resistance to change at **top management and in leadership**. Examples included a resistant client project manager (Expert 2) and resistance in the leadership during a steering committee (Expert 4). Expert 3 further highlighted that while leadership resistance was prevalent during the strategy phase of his project, “the implementation phase of the tool then led to resistance in the operating staff”. This underscores the stakeholder-specific nature of resistance in consulting projects.

The **forms of resistance** to change observed varied. Passive forms were more commonly mentioned by the experts, including behaviors such as “asking the same questions to slow down the process” (Expert 3), “avoiding topics”, “silence and lack of participation in meetings” (Expert 1) or “ignoring requests” (Expert 5). However, more active forms of resistance were also encountered. For instance, Expert 2 described a highly active form, which manifested as “insults and questions in every single meeting”, regarding the relevance of the change and proposals of the consultants. Nevertheless, the consultant emphasized that such overt resistance to change is “not common” in the strategy phase and attributed it to the personality of the resistant project manager as well as specific client challenges, such as the firing of the client’s CEO, which led to the loss of the project sponsor. However, Expert 3 also highlighted that more overt resistance to change is possible in the strategy phase, noting that “usually the [individual] voice of a manager is louder”, particularly when compared to those at lower hierarchical levels.

Furthermore, resistance to change was often tied to **data sharing** for the status quo analysis. This manifested in various behaviors, such as providing incomplete data, sending the data “too late” (Expert 5), or “not providing the data needed” at all (Expert 2). In this context, operational stakeholders also were relevant, as Expert 4 noted that the consulting team “relied heavily on input from the operational level”.

Connection to Literature Review

The interview findings confirm the multi-faceted nature of resistance to change described in the literature, aligning with Waddell and Sohal (1998). During the strategy phase, resistance to change predominantly manifested as passive behaviors, such as organizational silence (Morrison and Milliken 2000), aligning with the concept of individual infrapolitics described by Mumby et al. (2017). Active manifestations, such as openly challenging consultants' proposals, were less common but support the concept of disobedience. Additionally, the interviews introduced the critical relevance of **top managemen**t during the strategy phase. This finding highlights the role of existing power dynamics in consulting projects (Thomas and Hardy 2011), particularly the influence of a project sponsor, as described by Nikolova and Devinney (2009). Thus, the insights reinforce existing theories while introducing stakeholder-specific resistance behaviors unique to the strategy phase of consulting projects.

4.1.2. Why Resistance to Change Manifested in the Strategy Phase

In the interviews, the consultants also shared their perspectives on the sources of resistance to change during the strategy phase. These insights included their observations of change recipients' behaviors and reasons for resistance expressed in discussions with stakeholders. An overarching reason for resistance to change was rooted in **human nature**, with Experts 3, 4, and 5 describing the fear of change as “a part of every human being”. Beyond this general view, the interviewees pointed to specific individual sources of resistance, including a “lack of understanding of the change” (Expert 3), or “a fear of more work” (Expert 2). In particular, this barrier to understanding was rooted in the **intangible nature of strategy**, as “strategy is just a collection of ideas and nothing concrete” (Expert 2). This suggests that its abstract nature made it difficult to understand the intended changes.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that the causes of resistance were often **stakeholder-specific**, particularly **among top and middle management**. As Expert 3 described, “You’re fighting against an ego – particularly in the strategy phase”. These sources of resistance manifested in various ways, such as a concern about others gaining more power (Expert 1), a department manager feeling excluded when his department was involved without prior consultation (Expert 4), or a leader being afraid of losing authority (Expert 3). Expert 3 elaborated on this dynamic, explaining that managers often invested heavily in building their teams and processes, treating them as their “kingdoms”. In one specific example, a department manager expressed strong resistance to the new HR strategy, perceiving the proposed changes as a “direct challenge to his kingdom, which he felt was being taken away” (Expert 3).

Furthermore, resistance to change was often attributed to a **lack of trust in the consultancy**. Expert 4 noted that consultants are frequently perceived as outsiders who lack an understanding of the client’s specific business context. However, this source of resistance to change was less widespread in established client-consultant relationships of the discussed projects (Experts 1, 3, 4) compared to engagement with new clients (Experts 2, 5). The motivation to collaborate with consultants, however, was viewed as highly individual, influenced by each stakeholder’s objectives and personalities (Expert 3). In addition, the lack of trust in the consultancy was particularly strong during the strategy phase, where leadership and management often had a more comprehensive knowledge of the company and industry, which resulted in skepticism toward consultants who proposed changes without this contextual insight (Expert 1). Thus, stakeholders felt that the consultants' recommendations were not relevant to their context (Expert 3).

In two transformation projects, the consultants also referred to the “overall state of the [automotive] industry”, and “political instabilities” (Expert 1), as well as the “high uncertainty in Germany” (Expert 2). This indicates that **external factors** may also create an environment that is conducive to the development of resistance to change.

Connection to Literature Review

In summary, the experts highlighted several examples of why resistance to change developed specifically in the strategy phase, aligning with and expanding upon existing literature. Cognitive barriers, such as the intangible nature of strategy, or the influence of existing power dynamics in top management, reflect Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes (2003) and Thomas and Hardy (2011). Behavioral and emotional factors, introduced by Piderit (2000), are similarly emphasized during the strategy phase, with resistance to change linked to a fear of power loss.

This illustrates how self-interest, as identified by Kotter and Schlesinger (2008), manifested in top management during consulting projects. The experts also introduced resistance arising from a lack of trust in consultants, which extends Kotter and Schlesinger's (2008) concept of mistrust in change processes to include mistrust in external agents of change. While the interviewees predominately emphasized individual-level sources, they also revealed the significant role of organizational sources, such as external influences, aligning with the findings of Dent and Goldberg (2013) and Gilgeous and Chambers (1999).

Thus, the interviews expand upon the cognitive and psychological sources of change identified as relevant in *Chapter 2.2.2.* However, they go beyond the literature insights by highlighting the need to examine the sources of resistance in the specific context of consulting projects, and the strategy phase.

4.1.3. Consultants' Coping Strategies to Resistance in the Strategy Phase

The resistance to change during the strategy phase required the experts to adopt a range of strategies. **Five overarching themes** emerged as consistent patterns in how consultants coped with resistance to change.

1. Root Cause Analysis

A frequently mentioned response of the consultants to resistance to change was understanding its specific sources within the project. In the strategy phase, consultants applied various tools such as "**get-togethers and open office hours**" (Expert 1), "**surveys**" (Experts 1, 2, 3), "**stakeholder interviews**" (Expert 5), and "**workshops**" (Experts 1, 3, 4) to uncover the underlying reasons for resistance. Expert 1 emphasized that "investigations to figure out the root cause" enabled his team to cope with resistance to change more effectively. For instance, a change readiness survey conducted as part of the global HR strategy project asked stakeholders how informed they felt, the level of support they received from leadership, and whether they felt equipped to handle the upcoming changes. The survey uncovered specific causes of resistance to change, such as “uncertainty about fulfilling new roles” (Expert 1). In response, the consultants implemented targeted measures, including rephrasing job descriptions to provide clarity (Expert 1). These methods ensured that resistance was addressed at its root.

2. Transparency & Communication

In the strategy phase of the consulting projects, effective stakeholder communication emerged as critical. Concrete communication measures employed by the consulting teams varied based on the sources of resistance to change, ranging from **in-person interactions** on client-site (Expert 2), such as explaining the change rationale (Expert 1, 4), to **digital approaches** like sending email reminders for missing data inputs (Expert 5).

Transparency was also identified as crucial in reducing uncertainty and addressing a lack of clarity about the rationale for change by the interviewees (Expert 1, 3, 4). Expert 1 emphasized the importance of “transparent communication at a very early point in time to create awareness”. Similarly, Expert 3 highlighted the value of **facilitating discussions to align perspectives**, noting that “good argumentation and discussions brought everyone – particularly management – onto the same page”. In this context, **stakeholder-specific communication** was essential. Expert 3 stresses that “the communication and the pictures you draw, are different when talking to management and operational staff”. Stakeholder mapping proved valuable in identifying key stakeholders and their interests, enabling consultants to communicate effectively with the right stakeholders (Expert 2). For top management and leadership, clear and compelling communication of a vision was critical to **establishing “a platform for the future”** (Expert 3) and ensuring that they understood the strategic direction and their roles within it. Additionally, the interviews revealed that consultants must actively support the client project manager in developing **effective internal communication strategies**. Expert 2 highlighted this by explaining how, in his project, the client’s project team presented the initiative improperly to stakeholders, which amplified resistance to change.

3. Trust & Relationship Building

The interviewees also emphasized the role of trust in the client-consultant relationships. For instance, Expert 1 highlighted "aligning on a personal level to take the fear away", noting that **informal interactions during get-togethers or coffee breaks**, helped stakeholders perceive consultants as "credible and approachable". The expert also noted the importance of showing stakeholders that "we are an external consultancy, but human, and we know what we are talking about". Moreover, building a relationship enabled the consultants to reveal **personal ambitions** and the correlation with the organizational change. (Expert 1). Similarly, Expert 2 acknowledged the challenges in establishing a relationship with the highly resistant project manager. The high degree of resistance led the consulting team to avoid the manager by reducing the time spent on the client-site. Reflecting on this, Expert 2 suggested that **informal settings like dinners or drinks** could have fostered a stronger personal connection and may have changed the project outcome. Building rapport was also mentioned to cope with the mistrust consultants faced as external change agents in the transformations. For instance, Expert 5 highlighted the need to build trust with representatives from the hospitals of the private equity company. Since the consultants were hired by the private equity firm, the hospital representatives were initially unaware of the project, creating a barrier to collaboration. **Clarifying meetings** to explain the project were scheduled, allowing the representatives to become familiar with the consultants and ask questions, fostering transparency. Similarly, Expert 4 observed that if any doubts arose, they dissolved once the consultants worked with the client and **demonstrated value**. These examples underscore the importance of **empathy**, as Expert 1 noted the need to "put yourself into the shoes of your opponent to react appropriately". Thus, during the strategy phase, building rapport was essential to effectively address resistance to change.

4. Involvement & Participation

During the strategy phase, actively involving stakeholders in the change process emerged as a recurring theme across the interviews (Experts 1, 2, 4, 5). For instance, Expert 5 conducted interviews with hospital representatives to present and validate the consultant's research. These interviews allowed client stakeholders to get involved in the status quo analysis by providing feedback and challenging the findings. The consultants sometimes even conducted multiple interviews on the same topic with the same individual to establish feedback loops and enhance the outcome. Similarly, Expert 1 explained that it was essential to "**involve people in the change**". For instance, Expert 4 described how his team **co-created solutions with staff** to ensure that stakeholders felt the final product was "their solution, not ours", encouraging innovation. Expert 2 further emphasized the importance of involving the client's organization, as it "**made stakeholders feel part of the new strategy and refined the strategies**". However, the expert noted that this approach was absent in his project, where the brewery's leadership chose a top-down strategy. This increased the resistance to change and ultimately impacted the project's outcome. Additionally, Expert 1 introduced the strategy of "**using the supporters to move the hesitators**". In the HR transformation project, the consultants intentionally worked on "neutralizing resistant opponents" by organizing town hall events. These events provided a platform for supporters of the change to connect with hesitators, fostering dialogue and encouraging hesitant stakeholders to align with the initiative through peer influence.

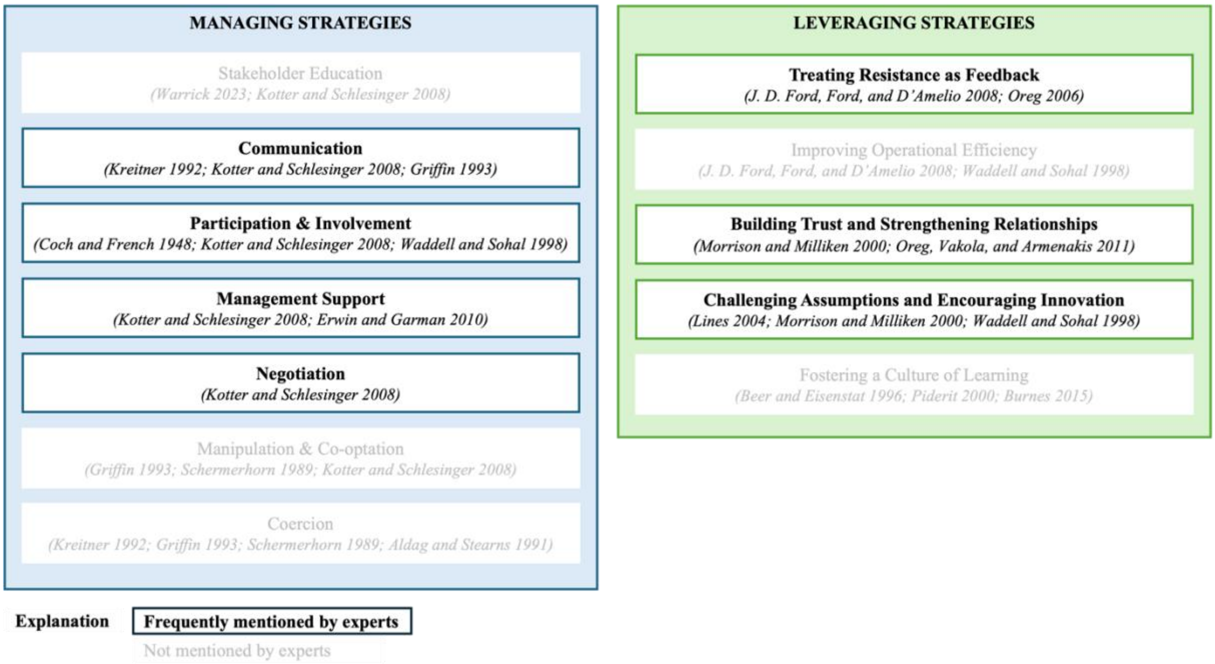
5. Incentives & Commitment

In the interviews, Experts 1 and 3 highlighted the importance of generating stakeholder commitment. Securing **buy-in from top management and leadership** emerged as a strategy to respond to resistance to change during the strategy phase. For instance, Expert 3 described how leadership was motivated by compensation and targets, demonstrating the value of **linking project outcomes to performance incentives**. However, the expert also criticizes this approach, by stating that, "it's critical that leadership genuinely stands behind the strategy", to ensure support throughout the project. Without the buy-in, resistance at the leadership level may persist into the implementation phase (Expert 1). To address this, **a clear and compelling vision** of the HR transformation strategy was developed to foster long-term commitment.

Connection to Literature Review

The five themes identified in the interviews align with the strategies outlined in the literature review (*Chapter 2.3*), offering practical insights into how consultants manage and leverage resistance to change during the strategy phase. The most common strategies applied by the experts are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure II: Managing and Leveraging Strategies Applied in the Strategy Phase



Key **management strategies**, such as **transparency and communication** as well as **involvement and participation**, identified in the interviews, strongly align with Kotter and Schlesinger (2008), and Coch & French (1948). During the strategy phase, consultants emphasized the importance of tailored communication, particularly with top management, to align stakeholders. Similarly, involving stakeholders in the status quo analysis or co-creating solutions, emerged as effective ways to manage resistance to change. Additionally, the experts highlighted the use of monetary incentives as a practical approach, aligning with the negotiation strategy outlined by Kotter and Schlesinger (2008). In this context, management support (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008; Erwin and Garman 2010) was also emphasized as crucial, with experts stressing the need to secure buy-in from top management and leadership to ensure commitment. Beyond these management strategies, the interviews revealed the importance of **trust and relationship building**, which align with **leveraging strategies**, such as building trust and strengthening relationships (Morrison and Milliken 2000). Experts stressed the significance of fostering personal connections and mutual understanding in consulting, which reduced skepticism and encouraged collaboration. Furthermore, consultants demonstrated **leveraging the resistance as feedback** (J. D. Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio 2008) through **root-cause analysis**, effectively uncovering and addressing underlying concerns. **Challenging assumptions and encouraging innovation** (Lines 2004; Waddell and Sohal 1998) allowed the creation of better strategies and ultimately better project outcomes.

These practical examples reinforce the relevance and applicability of both managing and leveraging strategies during the strategy phase of consulting projects. By integrating insights with established theories, the findings highlight how consultants can not only manage resistance to change but also use it as a resource to inform and improve change outcomes. However, management approaches were found to be more commonly utilized than leveraging strategies.

4.1.4. Challenges in Leveraging Resistance to Change in the Strategy Phase

During the interviews, several challenges were mentioned to successfully leverage resistance to change. For instance, Expert 2 questioned his coping strategies, by acknowledging that he "should have done things differently".

Some barriers to leveraging resistance to change were **specific to the client and project background**, such as the "high complexity" of the large-scale HR transformation for 600,000 employees (Expert 1) and the absence of strong C-level sponsorship (Expert 2). Furthermore, organizational culture and industry conditions were frequently mentioned as barrier to leverage resistance to change. Traditional cultures, like in the family-owned brewery hindered the use of resistance as constructive feedback (Expert 2). In contrast, modern cultures, such as in the telecommunications industry, were more open to leveraging approaches (Expert 3). Additionally, industry challenges, like “financial pressures and layoffs in the automotive sector”, led consultants to prioritize rapid solutions over leveraging efforts (Experts 1, 3).

Leveraging resistance was also influenced by **consulting-specific barriers**, such as the consultants' mindsets, with openness and a positive view of resistance being critical. Some consultants perceived resistance negatively, thus focusing on managing resistance to change (Expert 2). **Hierarchical dynamics**, such as “junior consultants lacking authority” (Expert 4), and “competitive tensions in **multi-firm collaborations**” (Expert 2), further hindered the ability to effectively leverage resistance.

Connection to Literature Review

In summary, leveraging resistance to change during the strategy phase may be constrained by **project-specific and consultant-specific challenges**, as reflected in the interviews. These findings align and extend the literature on key challenges, such as the impact of **power dynamics** (Thomas and Hardy 2011), illustrated through the importance of C-level sponsorship (Expert 2). Additionally, the barrier introduced in the interviews - that traditional organizational culture can hinder consultants’ efforts in leveraging resistance - aligns with the literature on the influence of **cultural norms** (Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003). Consultants also provided examples of **external pressures** in the strategy phase, such as industry conditions. However, the interviews also introduced new challenges, emphasizing how project complexity, and hierarchical dynamics or multi-firm collaborations, can shape leveraging efforts. These insights add practical context for the strategy phase of consulting context, underscoring the complexity of leveraging resistance to change and the need for context-aware strategies.

4.2. Resistance to Change in the Implementation Phase

The interviewees chosen for the implementation phase of consulting have an average of 5.2 years of experience in the consulting sector with individual experience from 2 to 10 years. The interviewees shared their practical experience in managing and executing complex implementation projects, demonstrating their expertise in overcoming challenges and delivering successful results in the consulting sector.

Table I: Project Overview – Implementation Phase

Expert	**Position**	**Experience** [in years]	**Project Description**
6	Senior Consultant	3	Rollout and project management for an e-commerce platform rollout for a European automotive OEM
7	Senior Consultant	4	Implementation of a new software tool in the telecommunications sector
8	Senior Manager	8	Integration of a marketing automation tool for a telecommunications client as part of a digital transformation project
9	Consultant	4	E-commerce transformation in the automotive industry, transitioning from waterfall to agile management approaches
10	Manager	10	HR transformation for a major German airport, affecting 20,000 people worldwide
11	Senior Associate	2	Automation of processes for a capital requirements regulatory system in the banking sector to improve compliance and operational efficiency

All of these projects focus on the implementation phase and include process optimization, system integration, and organizational change management in industries as diverse as telecommunications, automotive, and banking. Consultants played key leadership roles, working closely with stakeholders to improve efficiency, alignment, and compliance while addressing client-specific challenges.

4.2.1. How Resistance to Change Manifested in the Implementation Phase

During the implementation phase, resistance to change primarily arose from operational teams and middle management, marking a shift from the leadership-focused resistance often observed during the strategy phase (Expert 8). Operational teams and middle managers directly affected by changes to workflows and responsibilities, expressed their concerns through various **forms of resistance**, both passive and active.

Passive resistance was more prevalent and included behaviors such as delayed responses, skipped meetings, and failure to participate in training sessions. For instance, Expert 7 observed operational staff “delaying schedules by not responding to our requests”, while Expert 8 noted that employees avoided scheduled team meetings and did not text back during the marketing automation tool rollout. Similarly, in the HR transformation project for a German airport, Expert 10 described how employees “did not come to information calls” or ignored updates on project progress, which further delayed implementation efforts. In the banking sector, Expert 11 encountered passive but impactful resistance when operations staff delayed providing inputs necessary for implementing a regulatory capital regime.

Active resistance, although less common, posed significant challenges. Expert 7 shared an example of a competing vendor withholding critical technical information during a software implementation, which eroded trust and delayed key milestones. Expert 8 faced active pushback during the rollout of a marketing automation tool, where operational teams strongly questioned the value of the new system and refused to commit until tangible benefits were demonstrated, but also insulted the expert directly during meetings.

Connection to Literature Review

Resistance to change during the implementation phase ranged from passive delays to active disruption, primarily driven by operational teams and middle management. These findings align with Mumby et al. (2017), who describe passive resistance, such as delayed responses and skipped meetings, as individual politics, where subtle noncompliance undermines progress. Similarly, their concept of collective infrapolitics, involving group-level resistance, was reflected in operational teams collectively resisting new approaches by adhering to established practices. The active resistance observed, such as withholding critical information or openly opposing consultants' recommendations, aligns with the overt forms of resistance described by Oreg et al. (2018), which involve emotionally charged and deliberate actions like vocal opposition or spreading critical opinions about the change. These behaviors, as highlighted in the literature, have the potential to escalate and significantly disrupt change processes.

The interviews expand upon the literature by providing concrete, contextualized examples of resistance to change, emphasizing the emotional, relational, and sector-specific dimensions. They also illustrate temporal and phase-specific shifts in resistance dynamics, enriching the broader theoretical frameworks presented by Mumby et al. (2017) and Oreg et al. (2018).

4.2.2. Why Resistance to Change Manifested in the Implementation Phase

The interviews with Experts 6 through 11 also provided valuable insights into the causes of resistance to change during the implementation phase. These reflections included their interpretations of stakeholder behavior as well as specific concerns expressed during interactions with change recipients. Resistance during this phase often arose because of the **direct and tangible impact** of the changes on individuals and teams, as well as broader organizational and external factors.

A recurring theme across the interviews was the **natural human tendency to resist disruption**. Expert 10 described resistance as "an expected reaction when people feel their routines are being disrupted". Expert 8 explained that operational teams often view change as "unnecessary disruption" to their established workflows, while Expert 10 noted that the employees simply "liked things the way they were". Expert 11 added that resistance was frequently tied to stakeholders feeling that "the changes were being imposed rather than co-created", which undermined their **sense of ownership** and contributed to skepticism. Collectively, the interviewees observed that people generally do not like being "pushed out of their comfort zone" and are hesitant when new changes are proposed.

Beyond these general trend, **specific sources of resistance** emerged from the interviews. One significant driver was the **mismatch between stakeholders' expectations and the actual changes being implemented**. Expert 6 explained how local market teams during the rollout of the e-commerce platform felt that "the solution did not address their operational needs", resulting in frustration and disengagement. Similarly, Expert 8 noted skepticism during the rollout of the marketing automation tool, as employees questioned the relevance of the system to their daily tasks and felt the benefits had not been clearly communicated.

Another critical source of resistance was **the fear surrounding role changes**, **increased workload, and accountability**. Expert 8 and 10 noted that employees often expressed concerns about how the new structures or tools would demand additional effort without sufficient capacity to manage the transition. For example, operational teams reported feeling overwhelmed by the expectation to adopt new tools while simultaneously maintaining their regular workload. Employees who were not directly involved in projects frequently resisted because they had to take on additional responsibilities from their colleagues who were assigned to project-related tasks. This perception of uneven workload distribution further amplified frustration and disengagement, as changes were viewed as a burden rather than a resource for improvement

Communication and organizational culture were also pivotal in shaping resistance. Expert 6 highlighted that during the e-commerce platform rollout, "decisions made at headquarters were not adequately communicated" to local teams, leaving them feeling excluded and uninformed. Similarly, Expert 10 noted that employees in the HR transformation project avoided updates about project progress because they perceived the process as untransparent. A lack of transparency and communication fostered skepticism, making it harder for employees to see how the changes aligned with their roles or contributed to organizational goals.

Connection to Literature Review

The causes of resistance to change identified in the interviews are closely aligned with findings in the literature. The natural human tendency to resist disruption, as described in the interviews, emphasized resistance as a force that opposes change. This behavioral tendency is further supported by Kotter and Schlesinger (2008), who identify low tolerance for change and self-interest as common sources of resistance. The interviews also revealed that inadequate communication and lack of transparency contributed to skepticism and disengagement, consistent with Kotter and Schlesinger (2008) and Coch and French (1948), who emphasize the importance of clear communication in overcoming resistance. Additionally, the interviews highlighted resistance stemming from a mismatch between stakeholders' expectations and the actual changes being implemented. This aligns with Rumelt's (1995) discussion on the challenges of overcoming entrenched ideas and distorted perceptions during organizational change.

The interviews expand upon the literature by offering detailed examples of resistance during implementation, such as mismatched expectations, increased workload, and inadequate communication. These insights align with and add depth to frameworks discussed by Rumelt (1995) and Kotter and Schlesinger (2008), emphasizing the operational and relational impacts of resistance.

4.2.3. Consultants' Coping Strategies to Resistance in the Implementation Phase

The implementation phase often triggered resistance, as changes directly impacted operational workflows and stakeholder responsibilities. Thus, consultants needed to address this resistance with strategies that combined managing and leveraging approaches. Insights from the expert interviews revealed four key strategies: Transparency and Communication, Trust and Relationship Building, Involvement and Participation, and Political and Structural Considerations.

1. Transparency & Communication

Transparent communication was widely recognized as a cornerstone of an effective resistance response. Expert 6 noted that poor communication often led to disengagement, with stakeholders delaying meetings and avoiding updates due to fears about how changes might impact their roles and tasks. To address these challenges, consultants employed proactive strategies to ensure stakeholders remained informed and engaged. A particularly effective approach, highlighted by all experts, involved bringing all involved teams together for **open discussions** about the upcoming changes. These sessions addressed what changes would occur, why they were necessary, and how they would affect both current and future workflows. Providing the teams with the opportunity to ask questions, voice concerns, and develop a shared understanding was described as a key strategy for reducing resistance to new solutions or tools. By fostering collaboration and **creating a space for dialogue**, consultants were able to build trust and reduce fears. To further enhance transparency across the project, Experts 6 and 9 emphasized the importance of **strict documentation** such as project commitment letters and meeting minutes. This thorough approach ensured that all stakeholders were aligned and that the project progressed with minimal confusion.

Transparency extended beyond simply communicating the positive changes. Consultants found that openly communicating unfavorable developments, such as delays, reduced skepticism and reinforced trust. Expert 8 emphasized that honesty in conveying challenges demonstrated a commitment to the project’s success. By maintaining clarity and consistency in their communication, consultants not only preventatively addressed stakeholder concerns but also minimized the potential for resistance, reinforcing the foundation for successful change implementation.

2. **Trust & Relationship Building**

Trust and credibility are pivotal in addressing resistance, particularly during the implementation phase, when stakeholders may feel uncertain about the implications of change. In practice, this was supported by Expert 8, who highlighted the value of informal interactions in building personal connections. **Casual discussions during lunch and coffee breaks** or **informal meetings** at the client allowed consultants to establish credibility, making stakeholders more receptive to dialogue (Experts 8, 11). Empathy was also critical, with Expert 10 noting that validating stakeholders' concerns allowed them to feel heard: "When we acknowledged their fears, they became more open to discussion". Expert 9 emphasized the critical role of ensuring stakeholders feel heard, explaining that **trust-building efforts** not only alleviated feelings of exclusion but also positively shifted stakeholders' perceptions of the project.

These findings underscore that building trust is an effective way to cope with resistance in the implementation phase, especially when consultants proactively address concerns and foster mutual trust.

3. **Involvement & Participation**

Active stakeholder engagement was another key strategy to respond to resistance during the implementation phase. By engaging stakeholders early and providing opportunities for participation, the interviewees fostered a sense of ownership that reduced resistance and encouraged collaboration.

Workshops, collaborative sessions, retrospectives and feedback were effective in bridging gaps between different stakeholder groups. Expert 6 and 9 described how such sessions aligned goals and increased buy-in by ensuring that all parties had a voice in the process. These practices also allowed consultants to directly address misaligned expectations or unrealistic deadlines. Expert 8 noted that operational teams' skepticism about the relevance of the project was managed by targeted meetings that clarified how the changes would fit into their workflows.

This engagement not only reduced resistance but also improved collaboration, underscoring the critical role of stakeholder involvement in fostering alignment and commitment.

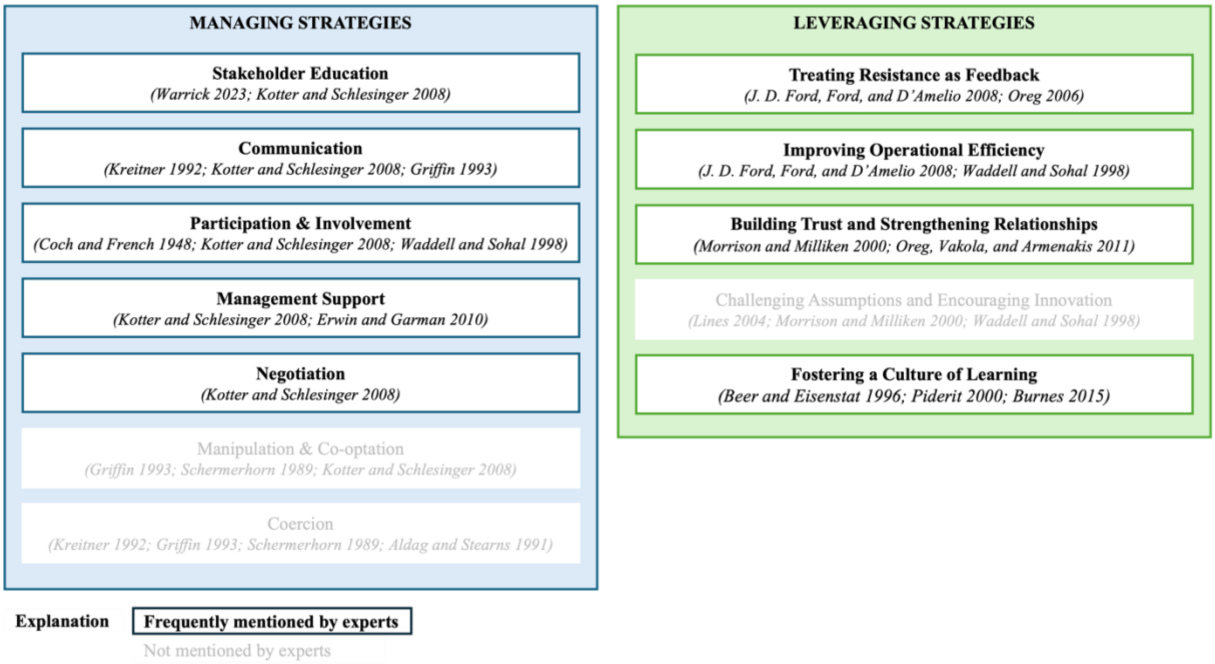
4. **Political & Structural Considerations**

To respond to resistance caused by political structures and rigid hierarchies during the implementation phase, consultants adopted strategies such as clarifying decision-making frameworks, refining roles, and mediating conflicts between stakeholders. Expert 6 emphasized the need to introduce a **clear governance model**, noting that frameworks helped "clarify roles and responsibilities" at every level. By establishing these structures, the team ensured faster solutions and reduced resistance tied to ambiguous responsibilities. Expert 8 addressed hesitation among stakeholders by explicitly defining their **roles and responsibilities** and **training sessions** for the new tool, which "helped to reduce confusion" and made them more comfortable committing to decisions. Expert 11 added that resistance was often reduced by clearly defining **success metrics**, which helped stakeholders understand how the changes aligned with broader organizational goals. Acting as mediators, some experts balanced leadership's strategic objectives with the operational needs of teams, bridging gaps to foster cooperation and reduce friction. By proactively managing these constraints, consultants facilitated smoother implementation and sustained alignment among all organizational levels (Expert 10, 11).

Connection to Literature Review

In summary, the four themes provide valuable insights into how consultants address resistance to change during the implementation phase. These findings build on the strategies discussed in *Chapter 2.3*, by showcasing their practical application. Experts adopted strategies for **managing resistance** that closely align with those outlined in the literature, as summarized in Figure III.

Figure III: Managing and Leveraging Strategies Applied in the Implementation Phase



Transparency & Communication played a central role, with consultants using open discussions, detailed documentation, and consistent updates to reduce uncertainty and foster trust. These practices reflect the literature's emphasis on **stakeholder education** and **transparent communication** as foundational for managing resistance (Warrick 2023; Kotter and Schlesinger 2008). Similarly, **involvement and participation** emerged as another critical strategy, with early engagement through collaborative workshops promoting ownership and reducing opposition, consistent with the literature's focus on participation and involvement to increase commitment (Coch and French 1948; Kotter and Schlesinger 2008). Additionally, some experts acted as mediators, balancing the strategic goals of leadership with the operational needs of teams to foster cooperation and reduce friction, consistent with the literature's view of **negotiation** as a key strategy for managing resistance to ensure stakeholder alignment and commitment (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008). Some experts also applied specific strategies for **leveraging resistance**, using it as a resource to refine strategies and address inefficiencies, aligning with the literature's view of resistance as a source of critical insights (J. D. Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio 2008).

Trust & Relationship Building was also crucial, as consultants used personal connections and empathy to support stakeholders and alleviate concerns, reflecting the literature's emphasis on **support** and **building trust and strengthening relationships** as essential to leveraging resistance (Coch and French 1948; Kotter and Schlesinger 2008; Waddell and Sohal 1998). Addressing **Political & Structural Considerations** by clarifying governance models and defining roles reflects the literature's emphasis on **improving operational efficiency**, which reduces resistance tied to the process and streamlines decision-making (J. D. Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio 2008).

The interviews expand upon the literature by highlighting the importance of informal interactions, such as casual conversations during breaks, in building trust and relationships. They also reveal operational challenges, like resistance tied to shifting roles and workload inequities, adding depth to theoretical discussions on managing resistance during implementation.

4.2.4. Challenges in Leveraging Resistance to Change in the Implementation Phase

Although consultants used a variety of strategies to manage resistance during the implementation phase, using it constructively proved to be difficult. This difficulty stemmed largely from the inherent **complexity of implementation projects**, where factors such as multiple stakeholders, logistical challenges, and tight timelines often created significant obstacles. Expert 8 emphasized that different time zones and local market needs complicated alignment efforts, while Expert 7 highlighted delays caused by dispersed teams and uncoordinated schedules. **Late-stage disruptions**, including delays in technical specifications, forced consultants into reactive "firefighting", as described by Expert 7, leaving limited capacity to leverage resistance. Compressed timelines, as in Expert 10's HR transformation project, "left no time for meaningful employee engagement", often resulting in resistance being perceived as an obstacle rather than a resource.

Cultural inertia further intensified resistance to change. Expert 9 observed that the transition to agile methods was impeded by deeply ingrained workflows and a strong adherence to the status quo, which hindered efforts to convert resistance into constructive dialogue. **Fear of role change** and **job security**, especially in volatile markets, increased skepticism. Expert 10 noted that employees avoided participating in decision-making processes because they feared a negative impact on their responsibilities. Similarly, Expert 8 described operational teams that viewed new systems as “unnecessary disruptions” rather than opportunities for improvement. Middle managers often struggled to effectively address resistance due to gaps in accountability and the lack of a coherent framework. **External pressures** also intensified the dynamics of resistance to change. Competitors, as Expert 7 recounted, occasionally withheld critical information, undermining trust and distracting from using resistance as a constructive force.

Finally, some consultants themselves influenced the challenges in leveraging resistance. Some experts saw resistance primarily as an obstacle rather than an opportunity for feedback, which compounded these difficulties. As one expert noted, “We often viewed resistance as something to be managed away, rather than a chance to learn” (Expert 7).

Connection to Literature Review

These findings are consistent with the key challenges to leveraging resistance in literature, including its frequent misinterpretation as outright opposition (J. D. Ford, Ford, and D’Amelio 2008), the influence of power dynamics among stakeholders (Thomas and Hardy 2011), cultural inertia in organizational environments (Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003), the influence of external pressures (Hiatt 2006), and the consultants’ own attitudes toward resistance to change (Warrick 2023). However, the interviews extend the literature by uncovering practical examples, such as the logistical complexities of managing global teams across time zones and competitive behaviors in consulting.

4.3. Diagnosis of Similarities and Differences in Coping Strategies

The interviews with consultants revealed key strategies for leveraging and managing resistance to change in the **strategy phase** and **implementation phase** of consulting projects. Firstly, consultants more commonly employed management strategies in both phases. Waddell and Sohal (1998) argue that modern coping strategies often overlook the utility of resistance to change. This underscores the need for clear guidelines to help consultants effectively leverage resistance in consulting projects. This view is supported by the interviews, as several consultants expressed uncertainty or requested clarification on the term "leveraging resistance to change" (Experts 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11).

Both strategy and implementation phase rely on core strategies in coping with resistance, such as **communication, trust-building, and participation** (Kotter and Schlesinger 2008; Coch and French 1948). However, their application varies due to the unique factors of each phase, including specific sources of resistance to change or the stakeholders involved (Pardo Del Val and Martínez Fuentes 2003). Transparency and effective communication are critical in coping with resistance to change and reducing uncertainty across phases (Warrick 2023; Kotter and Schlesinger 2008). In the strategy phase, communication focuses on conveying abstract concepts like vision and strategic alignment, tailored to top management to ensure alignment (Experts 1, 3, 4). In contrast, the implementation phase emphasizes practical updates, training, and consistent stakeholder involvement to integrate new systems and processes while helping operational teams adapt (Expert 9). Moreover, the commonly applied strategy of **trust-building** also adapts to the context of each phase. The strategy phase centers on engaging top management through personal interactions and incentives to foster leadership alignment (Experts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). During the implementation phase, trust-building shifts to middle management and operational teams, promoting collaboration and adapting workflows to address resistance arising from misaligned expectations, role concerns, and increased workload

(Experts 8, 10, 9). Finally, **participation** plays a vital role in both phases but manifests differently. In the strategy phase, participation often involves high-level discussions to align leadership, whereas, in the implementation phase, it includes active involvement from operational teams to ensure the smooth adoption of tools and processes. Together, communication, trust-building, and participation form the foundation for effectively managing resistance and ensuring the success of consulting interventions.

Furthermore, **distinct strategies** emerge based on phase-specific challenges. In the strategy phase, consultants focus on leadership alignment, applying **root-cause analyses** to uncover sources of resistance in top management (Experts 1, 3), such as fear of power loss (Expert 3). Leadership commitment is often secured through incentives in this phase (Experts 1, 3). In contrast, the implementation phase emphasizes **leveraging operational efficiency** and **educating stakeholders** on new workflows to ensure smooth execution (Waddell and Sohal 1998; Warrick 2023; Kotter and Schlesinger 2008).

The interviews additionally revealed **key challenges in leveraging resistance** to change for both strategy and implementation phase of consulting projects. In the strategy phase, consultants for example highlighted the lack of C-level sponsorship, and hierarchical dynamics as significant barriers, particularly in traditional industries (Experts 2, 3). In contrast, the implementation phase was marked by logistical complexities, such as managing dispersed teams, tight timelines, and late-stage disruptions, and different stakeholder needs (Experts 6, 7, 8, 10). Despite these differences, both phases shared challenges rooted in power dynamics (Thomas and Hardy 2011) and external pressures (Gilgeous and Chambers 1999; Hiatt 2006).

By aligning coping strategies with the distinct sources and forms of resistance in each phase, consultants can more effectively respond to resistance to change. This phase-specific understanding of resistance to change enables consultants to manage it more effectively while indicating opportunities to leverage resistance as a source for improved change outcomes.

5. Practical Recommendations for Consultants

The insights gathered in the diagnosis emphasize that resistance to change, often seen as a challenge, holds untapped potential to enhance consulting project outcomes. As one interviewee remarked, “Although resistance may feel frustrating at times, it ultimately led to a more unique project and a better outcome, leaving the client happier in the end”. By embracing this perspective, consultants can transform resistance to change into a valuable resource, uncovering hidden organizational concerns, fostering stronger stakeholder alignment, and driving innovation. Practical strategies drawn from both the literature and real-world experience demonstrate how consultants can leverage this resistance as an integral part of the change process, providing tangible guidance that is applicable across various industries and adaptable to different project phases.

5.1. Universal Guidelines for Consulting Projects

The following two universal guidelines establish a foundation for consultants to leverage resistance to change across all phases of a project, enabling consultants to drive successful change initiatives.

5.1.1. Leveraging Resistance to Change as Feedback

To leverage resistance to change, consultants must first challenge their definition of resistance to change. They must understand that treating resistance as an opportunity for feedback, can be beneficial to change outcomes, thus, resistance should not be viewed solely as an obstacle but as an opportunity to gather critical feedback that can improve project outcomes.

Consulting firms play a critical role in fostering this mindset. In particular, partners and project managers should actively promote a culture where leveraging strategies are encouraged. This can include providing consultants with training on how to interpret resistance to change constructively and integrate leveraging strategies into their daily client-consultant interactions. In client projects, consultants may encourage stakeholders frequently to share feedback by communicating openness for suggestions, as well as implementing feedback loops to openly address arising resistance to change. The collected insights into potential pitfalls, inefficiencies, or overlooked concerns can then be leveraged by incorporating the feedback in the project to enhance change outcomes.

5.1.2. Building Trust and Strengthening Relationships

Trust is essential for leveraging resistance to change and fostering collaboration during the strategy and implementation phases of consulting projects. Consultants can build trust by actively demonstrating empathy for the client, not only striving to understand the client’s current situation and context - including external pressures that may be influencing their behavior - but also making an effort to understand the personalities involved. Recognizing individual stakeholder’s unique motivations, communication styles, and sources of resistance can enable consultants to build stronger connections. Moreover, consultants must maintain clear, consistent communication with stakeholders to establish sustainable relationships. For example, consultants should schedule regular check-ins to address concerns and provide updates to ensure that stakeholders feel informed and involved. Informal interactions also play an important role. For example, consultants can join team coffee breaks, participate in office conversations, or host informal lunches with key stakeholders. These personal connections create opportunities to better understand stakeholder perspectives, demonstrate genuine care, and establish credibility. In addition, consultants should show respect for stakeholders' expertise by actively listening during meetings and incorporating their feedback into the project. Stakeholders who feel understood and respected are more likely to engage openly and constructively, transforming resistance into dialogue to leverage for better change outcomes.

5.2. Guidelines for the Strategy Phase

While the universal strategies establish the foundation for leveraging resistance to change in consulting projects, additional guidelines for the specifics of the strategy phase are necessary.

5.2.1. Leveraging Power Dynamics Among Leadership

During the strategy phase underlying power dynamics fuel resistance to change. To leverage these dynamics, consultants must first acknowledge the critical role of leadership, such as top management. Consultants must view power dynamics not only as a source of resistance to change but as an opportunity to align leadership, strengthen their ownership of the change process and improve project outcomes. Consultants can begin by identifying the most influential leaders and their interests. In this context, consulting firms need to equip consultants with tools, such as stakeholder mapping, to better understand the underlying power dynamics. Furthermore, engaging leaders early in the strategy phase and framing changes as opportunities for leadership to enhance their roles and influence within the organization, can support in generating commitment. When leveraged, power dynamics can transform leadership resistance into a driving force for change. This ensures top management not only supports but actively champions the strategic vision, laying a strong foundation for successful change outcomes.

5.2.2. Generating Strategic Insight and Driving Innovation

Resistance to change offers consultants an opportunity to generate strategic insights and drive innovation in the strategy phase. To leverage resistance, consultants must communicate openness to suggestions, particularly to resistant stakeholders. By identifying concerns such as unmet needs or inefficiencies, consultants can challenge assumptions, explore alternative approaches, and uncover opportunities for innovation. Facilitating workshops or meetings that host supporters, resistors, and consultants fosters open dialogue and diverse perspectives, helping to address the sources of resistance while refining strategic objectives. Analyzing patterns of resistance can also reveal underlying market trends or process gaps, that help form innovative strategies or solutions. By reframing resistance as constructive criticism and fostering clear communication, consultants can enhance the strategic vision, align leadership, and position organizations for future growth and competitive advantage.

5.3. Guidelines for the Implementation Phase

To leverage resistance during the implementation phase, two tailored guidelines are introduced that consider the unique challenges of this stage.

5.3.1. Building a Learning Culture

One of the guidelines is addressing resistance by fostering a learning culture within the organization. Resistance often signals gaps in knowledge and skills, making targeted training an essential tool for addressing concerns and fostering growth. Consultants can initiate training programs that begin with sessions that explain the rationale for change, helping to build buy-in and reduce skepticism. Follow-up training should include role-specific modules tailored to practical needs to ensure that stakeholders feel equipped to adapt to new workflows.

To make this training more effective, consultants can introduce hands-on simulations, where stakeholders can practice using new tools in a risk-free environment. Peer-led training, where early adopters mentor their peers, can further encourage knowledge sharing and trust in the process. On-demand microlearning modules, such as short (AI-generated) video tutorials, provide ongoing support as new challenges arise during implementation. Measuring the results of these training efforts through real-world application exercises ensures progress is tracked, highlights areas for improvement, and instills a mindset of continuous learning throughout the organization. These steps turn resistance into an opportunity for development and sustainable growth.

5.3.2. Improving Operational Inefficiencies

Another key guideline is to use resistance as a diagnostic tool to identify and improve operational inefficiencies. When resistance to change arises due to perceived redundancies or misaligned workflows, consultants should prioritize active listening and feedback collection from stakeholders. Conducting collaborative process-mapping exercises with stakeholder input allows the team to recognize inefficiencies and design streamlined workflows that align with the new systems while meeting the organization's operational needs.

Additionally, consultants should analyze resistance to uncover gaps in resource allocation, such as inadequate staffing or unclear responsibilities. Using this feedback, they can recommend and implement targeted adjustments, such as reallocating resources, redefining roles, or refining workflows to address these challenges. These tangible actions not only resolve immediate concerns but also create long-term improvements in operational efficiency, ensuring the organization is better equipped for future challenges.

In summary, the universal and phase-specific approaches provide consultants with practical guidelines to enhance project outcomes in the strategy and implementation phases by effectively leveraging resistance to change.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Key Insights

This study aimed to address the question: *"How can consulting firms leverage client organizations' internal resistance to change to enhance project outcomes?".* The qualitative interviews offered detailed practical examples of consulting projects, expanding the general findings of the literature review particularly to the consulting context. The interviews revealed similarities and differences of how consultants cope with and in particular leverage resistance to change during the strategy and implementation phase to ultimately derive a set of guidelines for consultants to more effectively leverage resistance to change.

In the strategy phase, resistance predominantly arises from top management and leadership due to power dynamics and skepticism about proposed changes, often manifesting passively through organizational silence, delayed or incomplete data sharing. In contrast, in the implementation phase, resistance to change is more prevalent among middle management and operational teams as changes directly disrupt workflows and roles, with both passive resistance, such as missed training sessions, and active resistance, such as insults, frequently occurring. Despite these differences, common coping strategies such as transparent communication, trust and relationship building, and participation and involvement prove universally effective in each phase.

The recommendations derived from this study are both universal and phase specific. Universal strategies include treating resistance as valuable feedback and building trust and relationships as a foundation for addressing resistance to change constructively. Specifically for the strategy phase, leveraging power dynamics among leadership and using resistance as a source of strategic insight and innovation prove high practical relevance. In contrast, in the implementation phase consultants should foster a learning culture and address operational inefficiencies to better navigate resistance to change. By understanding resistance to change as a resource, consultants can unlock new opportunities to become more effective change agents, driving administrative, structural, or technological change projects within their clients' organizations. The study's guidelines equip consultants with the strategies to transform the resistance from a barrier to a valuable source for enhanced project outcomes.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research Opportunities

This study focuses on consultants' perspectives of resistance to change during the strategy and implementation project phase. While this approach offers valuable insights into strategies and practices, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Scope of the Study

The reliance on interviews with consultants limits the exploration of resistance from the client's perspective. Although consultants provided critical insights into strategies for addressing resistance, their perspectives do not fully capture the experiences and motivations of clients, as emphasized in *Chapter 2.1.1* (Thomas and Hardy 2011; Oreg et al. 2018). The client perspectives would have added depth but was beyond the scope of this research. Additionally, the study assumes that resistance can often be leveraged but does not address situations requiring immediate resolution due to time constraints or operational pressures, reducing its applicability to urgent scenarios. The limited sample size further restricts the generalizability of findings across industries, organizational types, and geographical contexts.

Ethical Constraints

The sensitive nature of consulting projects imposed ethical constraints (Mingaleva 2013; Misoch 2019; Smith, Van Vuuren, and Visser 2003). To maintain client confidentiality and adhere to ethical principles, interviewees could not disclose project details, such as client identities or specific outcomes. Measures to ensure compliance, such as anonymization and securely storing data, were taken. However, they reduced the depth of contextual data available.

Analytical and Contextual Limitations

The study does not account for variations in resistance management strategies between smaller organizations and large multinational corporations. Additionally, factors such as employee demographics, and industry-specific contexts were not explored, limiting the study's ability to address how these variables shape resistance to change and its management.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should focus on addressing the study's limitations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of resistance to change. Incorporating client perspectives alongside consultants' views could emphasize the dynamics of resistance to change more holistically. Comparative studies could explore differences in coping strategies between smaller organizations and large multinational corporations, accounting for structural and cultural variations. Additionally, investigating the long-term impact of leveraging strategies and examining how different roles, generational groups, or organizational levels respond to these strategies would offer deeper insights. By expanding these areas, future studies can advance both theoretical frameworks and practical approaches in leveraging resistance to change.

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1: Overview of the Interviewees for the Expert Interviews

Table 1: Overview of the Interviewees for the Expert Interviews

Expert	**Position**	**Experience** [in years]	**Project Description**
1	Senior Manager	10	Global HR transformation strategy development for a large-scale project in the automotive sector
2	Consultant	6	Strategy development technological transformation of a Bavarian brewery
3	Senior Manager	5	Global HR transformation strategy development for a large-scale project in the automotive sector
4	Manager	10	End-to-end PMO strategy development in the telecommunications sector
5	Junior Consultant	2	Strategy development for portfolio performance enhancement of a healthcare company under private equity management
6	Senior Consultant	3	Rollout and project management for an e-commerce platform rollout for a European automotive OEM
7	Senior Consultant	4	Implementation of a new software tool in the telecommunications sector
8	Senior Manager	8	Integration of a marketing automation tool for a telecommunications client as part of a digital transformation project
9	Consultant	4	E-commerce transformation in the automotive industry, transitioning from waterfall to agile management approaches
10	Manager	10	HR transformation for a major German airport, affecting 20,000 people worldwide
11	Senior Associate	2	Automation of processes for a capital requirements regulatory system in the banking sector to improve compliance and operational efficiency

Appendix 2: Interview Questions for the Semi-Structured Interviews

Table 2: Interview Questions

Interview Sections	**Questions**
Part I: Opening And Introduction	**Introduction, Purpose and Research Objective:** Thank you for taking the time for this interview. I am conducting this interview as part of my master's thesis, which focuses on understanding how consulting firms encounter and leverage resistance to change during different project phases — specifically, strategy and implementation — to improve project outcomes. In today's interview, I would like to draw from your personal experience in consulting, particularly in the [strategy/implementation] phase. As previously mentioned, I kindly ask that you answer the questions with reference to one specific client (project), where you encountered resistance to change during this phase and refer to specific examples. **Confidentiality and Consent:** Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can choose to pause or withdraw from the interview at any time. Your responses will remain confidential.
Part II: Personal and Project Background	Could you briefly introduce yourself, your role and your experience in the consulting industry?
	Could you briefly describe a project in the [strategy / implementation] phase where you faced resistance to change, and your role in it?
	How long have you / your firm been working with the client, and how is the relationship?
	How would you describe the culture of the client, are they more traditional or progressive?
	Back-Up: *How many years of experience do you have in consulting?* *What's the size of the project?*
Part III: Resistance to change in the strategy/ implementation phase	How would you define resistance to change in consulting? Do you view resistance as purely negative, or do you also see positive aspects to it?
	Could you give specific examples of how resistance to change manifested during the [strategy/implementation] phase of this project? For example, what behaviors or attitudes indicated resistance?
	Who within the client organization tended to resist the most? Was resistance more common among certain individuals, specific groups, or as an overall attitude?
	What do you believe were the main reasons for the resistance to change you observed? Could you provide specific examples or situations that illustrate these reasons?
	Do you feel that some resistance to change was directed specifically toward you or your team because of your role as consultants? If yes, could you share a specific instance where this was the case?
	Do you believe that the forms and sources of resistance to change you encountered are specific to this project phase?
	Back-Up: *Do you believe that factors like a consultant's seniority or familiarity with the client organization impacted the level of resistance to change encountered in a client project?* *Do you think the size or complexity of the project had any influence on the type or intensity of resistance to change encountered?*
Part IV:	Could you describe how you / your team responded to the resistance to change encountered in this project? Could you walk me through a specific instance?

Consultant responses to resistance to change	Did you primarily use management strategies to overcome the resistance to change, or did you take a more leveraging approach? What factors influenced this choice?
	Was this approach successful? If so, what factors contributed to its success?
	Can you share instances where resistance to change significantly improved the project outcome?
	What challenges and barriers have you encountered when trying to leverage resistance to change?
	Back-Up: *Did you find that resistance to change evolved over the course of the project? If so, how did your response change?*
Part V: Closing	Based on your experience, what is the main insight you would share with others on handling resistance to change constructively in the [strategy/implementation] phase?

Appendix 3: Overarching Themes in the Strategy Phase

Table 3: Overarching Themes in the Strategy Phase

Overarching Themes & Description	**Practical Application of Coping Strategies** (Examples)	**Manifestations of Resistance to Change** (Examples)	**Supporting Quotes**
Root Cause Analysis Uncovering the underlying root causes of the resistances to change to address them effectively	Get-togethers; open office hours; change readiness surveys; stakeholder interviews; workshops; root cause investigations	All the examples listed below are relevant for root cause analysis.	*"Investigations to figure out the root cause of resistance was essential to address it effectively. Without it, you risk solving the wrong problem."*
Transparency & Communication Applying tailored communication to ensure clarity, understanding and early alignment of the changes	In-person interactions on the client side; explanation of change rationale; email reminders; transparent communication; early creation of awareness; facilitation of discussions; stakeholder mapping; stakeholder-specific communication; enabling effective internal communication	Repeated questions; silence in meetings; ignorance of requests; topic changes; withholding of data; incomplete data delivery; delayed data inputs	*"Clear and early communication prevented misalignment and built trust, ensuring smoother change progress."* *„Transparency is key; when stakeholders don't understand the vision, it becomes much harder to align them with the change."*
Trust & Relationship Building Developing trust and fostering personal and professional relationships with stakeholders to create a supportive change environment	Personal-level alignment; informal interactions; credibility-building efforts; demonstration of approachability; humanization of consultants; clarification of personal ambitions; clarifying meetings; transparency; demonstration of value; empathy	Mistrust of consultants; skepticism about expertise; rejection of recommendations; insults	*"People often think, 'Here comes the smart consultant who knows nothing about my business,' but once we worked closely with them, the doubts disappeared."* *"We organized informal events like dinners to connect personally and built trust."*
Involvement & Participation Actively engaging stakeholders in decision making and co-creation of solutions during the change process	Stakeholder interviews; research validation; involvement in status quo analysis; feedback loops; co-creation of solutions; avoidance of top-down approaches; town hall events; open dialogue; peer influence	Reluctance to participate; lack of engagement; challenging proposals; questioning the change rationale	*"We involved them early, explaining the problem and trying to include them in the idea so it feels like their solution, not ours."* *„People resisted less when they were*

			engaged from the start and felt heard in the decision-making process."
Incentives & Commitment Providing incentives and securing stakeholder commitment to support the change	Buy-in from top management and leadership; compensation and targets; alignment of leadership with the strategy; long-term commitment; development of a clear and compelling vision	Resistance in top management and leadership; concerns of exclusion in steering committees; challenging proposals; concerns about power loss	*„Compensation systems motivated leadership but was critical that leadership genuinely stood behind the strategy."*

Appendix 4: Overarching Themes in the Implementation Phase

Table 4: Overarching Themes in the Implementation Phase

Overarching Themes & Description	**Practical applications of Coping Strategies** (Example)	**Manifestations of Resistance to Change** (Examples)	**Supporting Quotes**
Transparency & Communication Applying tailored communication to ensure clarity, understanding and early alignment of the changes	Documentation of aligned decisions; written confirmations; open discussions; Q&A sessions; communicating unfavorable developments	Delays in responses or actions required for implementation; disregard for updates or announcements; questions about the relevance or necessity of changes; expressions of frustration	*"We set up meetings where we explained the changes, why they were happening, and how they would benefit everyone. We also made sure to listen to their concerns and address them as much as possible."* *"We shared progress updates consistently, even when details were not fully finalized. Being transparent about delays or missing approvals helped manage expectations and avoided unnecessary speculation."*
Trust & Relationship Building Developing trust and fostering personal and professional relationships with stakeholders to create a supportive change environment	Casual discussions during breaks; informal meetings; validation of concerns; trust-building efforts; creation of inclusive dialogue	Withholding of critical or relevant information; distrust in consultants or leadership decisions; doubts about the motives behind changes; opposition to consultants' recommendations; avoidance of collaboration or engagement	*"I'd make it a point to have casual conversations during coffee breaks or just check in informally. That really helped people feel more comfortable opening up."* *"Having good personal relationships helped. Even if they resisted the decisions from headquarters, they trusted us enough to openly discuss things on a rational basis."*
Involvement & Participation Actively engaging stakeholders in decision making and co-creation	Early engagement of stakeholders; workshops; collaborative sessions; targeted communication	Avoidance of participation in meetings or training sessions; disregard for	*"We set up smaller working groups where they could give input and feel like they had a say*

of solutions during the change process		updates or announcements	*in the process. That was a game-changer."* *"We involved all the stakeholders in workshops and retro sessions to listen to their concerns and find a common ground for the strategic direction."*
Political and Structural Considerations Addressing organizational hierarchies, decision-making structures, and power dynamics to align priorities, clarify roles, and ensure accountability in change initiatives	Decision-making frameworks; defining roles and responsibilities; mediation; governance model; definition of success metrics	Confusion about roles and decision-making processes; mismatched priorities between leadership and operational needs; concerns about uneven workload distribution or unclear accountability	*"The hierarchical structure made decision-making slow. We addressed this by clearly defining roles and responsibilities early on to ensure accountability."*