How to Handle Detractors in a Change-Management Effort

[The Diffusion of Innovation](#) theory developed by E.M. Rogers in the 1960s illustrates how different groups of people adopt new products and services at different rates. The theory how some people are eager to begin using a new innovation, while others test the waters more slowly. Still others resist the innovation for some time. And some may never get on board.

A similar pattern occurs in organizational change efforts. Some people jump on board quickly; some wait until they're sure the new way of working isn't just leadership's latest fad; others—whom we'll call detractors—continue to resist new ways of working for some time.

Detractors can cause no small amount of worry and headache for the executives and leaders trying to implement organizational change. At Arbinger, we often work with clients wondering what can be done. Are there ways to invite, encourage—even prod—detractors to get on board with the program?

Well, yes. There are ways to invite others to change. [See this blog](#), for example.

The problem is this: If detractors do not feel understood, safe, and supported, they are highly unlikely to change when

asked. To effectively invite others to change, change leaders might consider the three steps of the [outward mindset pattern](#):

1. See others as people
2. Adjust our own efforts
3. Measure our impact

Let's explore each of these steps in more detail as they relate to detractors in change efforts.

See People

Consider the burden carried by people who have always been a certain way in their career. They likely learned to be that way from the culture they 'grew up in,' professionally speaking. They were rewarded and encouraged for thinking and acting in certain ways. Rewards may have been passive—acquiescence or silence in response to bad behavior, for example—or active, such as favorable assignments or promotions. Perhaps the person caused lots of problems on their team and were promoted to get them out of the way!

Alternatively, the detractor may have seen their leaders succeed through self-focused or other means harmful to the larger organization. Unhelpful thinking and behavior is advanced when leaders set poor examples by role modeling the thinking and behavior the organization does not want from its employees.

To invite detractors to change, consider their professional background and the "baggage" they might be carrying. Rather than judge, condemn, or see them as a problem, get curious about how the detractor might be seeing and experiencing the change effort.

Adjust Efforts

Next, consider how the change effort might be adjusted to better help or invite detractors to make the desired changes.

People have naturally constructed not only a worldview but also their own professional identity around the past organizational culture. Sometimes, the pain of letting go of the security of one's identity can be too high for people to bear. Because of this, it may be appropriate to allow the culture to shift around these people, enabling them time to deconstruct and reconstruct themselves around the new culture.

In other words, sometimes it might be okay to adjust the organizational-change timeline. Allow detractors to detract, at least for some time. Provide them the space and support to adopt the new ways at their own pace. You might find that when all is said and done, former detractors are some of the strongest supporters of the new ways—because they did their own "due diligence" and came to their own conclusions that the new way is the best way.

Measure Impact

Understanding our impact is critical in any change effort. Regularly deployed surveys and assessments can be helpful in this regard. For example, in our work with clients, Arbinger recommends using a Mindset Assessment to track cultural change toward an [outward mindset](). As the culture makes demonstrable changes, detractors ought to sense an increasing invitation and support to change themselves.

That said, once the organization has accomplished a pre-established level of change implementation, there still may be those who are unable to make the shift. These people will feel the need to move on, and the organization ought to support them in doing so.