

PSYCHOLOGY OF WORK AND ORGANIZATIONS

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Defense mechanisms · Managerial insight · Diagnosis and intervention

The Neurotic Organization · Kets de Vries & Miller (1984) · Chapters 6–8

Learning objectives

By the end of this session, students should be able to...

- Differentiate organizational resistance from underlying defenses.
- Recognize six psychodynamic defense mechanisms in managerial behavior.
- Explain how insight and working through support change.
- Apply a four-step diagnostic and intervention framework.

Three chapters, one process

CHAPTER 6

Identify sources of resistance and defensive responses to threat.

CHAPTER 7

Support insight through confrontation, clarification, interpretation and working through.

CHAPTER 8

Diagnose symptoms and roots; design interventions and preventive practices.

Three sources of resistance

A psychodynamic distinction from Chapter 6

Defensive resistance

Anxiety-reducing mechanisms distort or avoid difficult realities.

Secondary gain

A problematic arrangement may still provide rewards, protection or privileges.

Superego resistance

Guilt, internalized obligations or punitive standards may inhibit adaptation.

Six defense mechanisms

Repression

Keeping threatening thoughts, feelings or memories outside conscious awareness.

Regression

Returning to earlier, familiar patterns of behavior when experiencing anxiety.

Projection

Attributing one's own unacceptable feelings or intentions to others.

Identification

Adopting the beliefs or behaviors of a powerful or feared other.

Reaction formation

Displaying an exaggerated attitude opposite to the unacceptable feeling.

Denial

Rejecting an unwanted aspect of external reality.

From defense to organizational dysfunction

Trigger

New strategy challenges a manager’s competence or authority.

Defense

The threat is denied, projected onto rivals, or avoided.

Collective effect

Information is suppressed, conflict escalates or decisions stall.

Key idea: a defensive response can become reinforced by organizational routines.

Chapter 7 · Insight is not simply information

- Confrontation: make discrepancies and neglected issues visible.
- Clarification: examine the problem and its context in greater detail.
- Interpretation: offer a tentative account of meanings and underlying patterns.
- Working through: repeatedly process and integrate difficult insights.

The change process: working through

Four phases described in Chapter 7

01

Shock

Disarray and interruption

02

Disbelief

Defensiveness; past orientation

03

Discarding

Disorganization, despair; letting go of old patterns

04

Realization

Reorganization; future orientation

Why insight may fail to produce change

- Recognizing a pattern can threaten a manager’s identity.
- Insight alone is insufficient: emotional resistance may persist.
- Existing incentives and hierarchies may reward old behavior.
- Working through takes time, repeated reflection and emotional processing.

Chapter 8 · The four steps of intervention

1	**List symptoms**	What is observably wrong?
2	**Model the syndrome**	Which causal loops and possible roots connect the symptoms?
3	**Compare alternatives**	Assess completeness, side effects, economy, depth, timing and feasibility.
4	**Plan implementation**	Who will act, how and with what follow-up?

Symptoms are not root causes

Symptoms

Falling sales; absenteeism; recurring delays; employee turnover.

Proximal problems

Poor decision rights; blocked information; rigid strategy; destructive conflict.

Possible roots

Leadership patterns, collective defenses, entrenched relational dynamics.

Insight-Oriented vs. Supportive Interventions

- Insight-oriented: explore emotional and interpersonal patterns through dialogue.
- Collect evidence across interviews, observations and performance data.
- Choose the intervention by severity, readiness, trust and resources.
- Combine both orientations where appropriate; avoid simplistic labels.
- Test hypotheses against evidence and alternative explanations.
- Revisit hypotheses with the people involved.

Preventing recurrent dysfunction

- Assess psychological fit in recruitment and management promotion.
- Examine roles, authority and person–organization relationships.
- Conduct departmental and organizational audits.
- Use organizational ombudsmen to surface upward feedback.
- Consider experienced consultants with longer-term involvement.

Key takeaways

- Resistance may protect psychological and social equilibria.
- Defense mechanisms help explain how threatening information is managed.
- Insight requires confrontation, clarification and sustained working through.
- Effective intervention links symptoms, organizational problems and roots.
- Prevention depends on the relational and institutional conditions for change.

References and critical reading

Kets de Vries, M. F. R., & Miller, D. (1984). The Neurotic Organization: Diagnosing and Changing Counterproductive Styles of Management. Jossey-Bass. Chapters 6–8.