People who cause blockages to vitally important changes at organisations by clinging on to outmoded ways of doing things can actually be a source of important insights – and you might even turn them into allies, explains Dushen Naidoo.

In the immortal TV series *Star Trek*, the Klingons were often fearsome adversaries of Captain James Kirk, his crew and the Federation. But on occasion, and especially during crucial times, they could be useful allies.

Today, another type of Klingon – people who cling on to old, outmoded ways of doing things when new ways are needed – can dramatically slow the successful progress of an organisation, or even stop that progress completely. Corporate Klingons need careful handling if they are not going to cause your organisation serious damage.

But, just like the Klingons in *Star Trek*, the Klingons of the business world can often be successfully wooed and turned into robust allies. And even better, there is often also a great deal you can learn from them.

Why do so many initiatives to implement changes at organisations – initiatives that may appear to make perfect, even utterly obvious sense – run into problems? Why do the most promising initiatives so often either fail to be implemented at all, or wind up being implemented in a half-hearted way that fails to bring the organisation anything remotely resembling the benefits it should be getting from it?

Why do people who want to make the change so often end up feeling frustrated and convinced that their energies have been diluted by indifference and inertia within the organisation?

In today’s enormously competitive markets, designing the right kind of change initiative and implementing it in an undiluted way that allows the organisation to reap the full benefits of the initiative is essential for maximising competitive edge. It may also be a prerequisite for sheer survival.
doesn't manage to harvest as many benefits as expected from
What exactly goes wrong, and why, when an organisation
Barriers to change
these areas, with stakeholders (such as shareholders) putting
clear sense that the organisation is failing in one or more of
Typically, the existence of a problem will be signalled by a
improvement will be implemented the improvement will vary from one
advocate to another.
advocates are also likely to be more aware of the political dynamics within the
Consultants may have a large part of their remuneration at
improvement. And in practice, what we usually mean by
In a corporate environment there is all too often a feeling that
advocating new ideas can be risky. People worry, by no means
always unreasonably, that sticking their neck out could lead to it
being cut off. In corporate life, the border between being seen
as possessing brilliant business insight, and being dangerously
unconventional and eccentric, may be alarmingly narrow.
This observation provides a vital clue as to why implementing
improvement within an organisation is all too often a
demoralising matter. What frequently happens in any
improvement process is that a disheartening polarisation soon
materialises between:
• those who enthusiastically advocate the improvement
• Klingons who cling on to old ways of doing things and who
therefore resist the change
In situations where there is no resistance to change, it is usually
inertial that the improvement will be implemented quickly
and in full, but in practice, experience tends to show that
such situations are rare. Instead, the polarisation is a much
more likely outcome. For this reason, it's vitally important and
instructive to look at both sides of this polarisation and the
dynamics affecting each side.
Enthusiastic advocates of the improvement
Would-be advocates of the improvement may be employees
(such as project sponsors or project managers) or external
consultants. How much a particular advocate will have at stake
in the bid to implement the improvement will vary from one
advocate to another.
Employees may have their corporate credibility to lose, a
potential promotion, or even the danger of being fired if they
get things wrong. An employee advocate may, for this reason,
be more willing to compromise when encountering obstacles,
but not necessarily only out of fear. Such advocates are also
likely to be more aware of the political dynamics within the
organisation.
Consultants may have a large part of their remuneration at
stake: increasingly clients are tending to favour shared-risk and
shared-reward deals. On the other hand, consultants are more
likely to be independent of internal corporate pressures, often
because they may not be particularly aware of them. Consultants
sell themselves on this independence/objectivity, which lets
them venture into potentially exciting areas where employees
restrained by timidity may be unwilling to venture.
Consultants sometimes also have another built-in advantage:
It may be easier for them to stick to their guns and have the
courage of their convictions, because the worst that can happen
to them if the relationship with the organisation sours is that
they’ll lose a client, which is much better than losing their job.
The Klingons
Viewed from the perspective of the would-be agent of the
change, it is useful in a practical sense to identify two types of
Klingons: rational and irrational ones.
Despite their dangerous reputation, corporate Klingons can,
in fact, be perfectly rational. Too many consultants automatically
assume that Klingons are bloody-minded individuals who
have a secret (or not so secret) basic resentment of consultants
and just want to spoil things. This might of course be true of
some Klingons, but it won't necessarily be true of all of them.
Ultimately, every instance of blockage by Klingons needs looking
at on a case-by-case basis.
Factors likely to influence irrational Klingons
What do we mean by calling Klingons ‘irrational’ in this context?
What we mean is that they fear an organisation’s improvement
initiative for reasons relating to their own personal agenda,
rather than to the objective needs of the organisation.
Their personal objections may be perfectly rational from
the Klingons’ own standpoint: but we are still entitled to call
the objections ‘irrational’. After all, the Klingons are being
paid to contribute to the success of the organisations, and
irrational Klingons have an agenda that isn’t focused around
the organisation’s interests.
Irrational Klingons may fear, for example, that the planned
improvement initiative is likely to interfere with their personal
career developments. Alternatively, they may have grounds for
thinking that they are in fact less efficient at their jobs than
they should be and that the improvement – or the process
of implementing it – will cast an unwelcome light on their
performance.
Klingons who don’t like taking holidays are often anxious
about light being thrown on to what they are doing. They
would much rather be there to keep things going the way
they have before: that is, concealed and in a dark corner of the
organisation, rather than exposed to the light.
It must also be said that some irrational Klingons are
deliberately unhelpful and bloody-minded individuals who just
don’t want to co-operate. They don’t answer emails, or if they
do, they don’t answer the questions you really need answered.
They find some excuse to avoid attending crucial meetings,
or – which can be even more annoying – they send along a
They fear an organisation’s improvement initiative for reasons relating to their own personal agenda, rather than to the objective needs of the organisation.

Factors likely to influence rational Klingons

Of course, in real life, Klingons don’t come along to discussion groups, or attend meetings (if they do attend them) wearing little name-badges with ‘rational’ or ‘irrational’ on them, business, like life itself, is not that simple – if only it were. In practice, there is no way to identify whether a Klingon is rational or irrational other than by getting to know them and investigating their objections.

The basic point about rational Klingons is straightforward: rational Klingons, almost by definition really, know things about the organisation you don’t know, or at least they believe they do. Sometimes this knowledge will consist of something they really should be telling you about but aren’t.

Consultants, in particular, often find that major pieces of news may be kept from them. Occasionally the news may be price-sensitive (an imminent take-over bid, for example) but more often the news is kept from the consultant for some other reason.

Frankly, large organisations are rarely very rational places. People have their own fiefdoms and all too often are far more concerned about these than about the ultimate fortunes of the organisation that employs them.

The other type of information is something that has a major and rational implication for your initiative but which may be difficult to uncover, not because someone is deliberately trying to keep it from you but because it may be information that not many people are aware of in its entirety.

Indeed, nobody may, in fact, be aware of its entirety, though some people may be aware of it in a vague sense. The information may not be something that will immediately be disinterred with a few scoops of the tureen when you interview people. All the same, the information may be extremely important.

A case study
For example, in a consulting project Airwave Professional Services carried out, the digital media function at an organisation fell under the operations banner, rather than under marketing. We couldn’t understand why, and interviews with executives yielded no coherent explanation. Finally, it emerged from a senior source that resourcing constraints had been a practical reason for digital media falling under operations.

It seemed quite clear to us that as the organisation grew, it was eminently sensible to move digital media back under the marketing banner. However, the people we spoke to at the organisation didn’t like the idea. They told us that the digital media team had no direct accountability to the marketing function and that, at present, digital media was benefiting from the emphasis operations always placed on delivery.

The point here is that the digital media people were not accountable to marketing but were reporting to operations. In effect, they were reporting to non-experts of marketing and as so, could do what they wanted (marketing or non-marketing) without really being directly responsible. They therefore enjoyed being autonomous. We strongly recommended in our report that digital media should be transferred from under the banner of operations to that of marketing.

Finally, there will be rational Klingons who tell you straightforwardly and uncomplicatedly that you don’t yet fully understand the processes you are planning to improve. They may be right; it sometimes takes a really able consultant to have the courage to go right back to the drawing boards.

Whether the Klingons at the organisation where you are seeking to implement a radical improvement are irrational or rational, the secret of dealing with them is to be as willing to reassure them as you are to learn from them. Properly approached – which usually means being shown that actually it’s in their interests to co-operate with you and further their organisation’s more successful, no matter what effect this might have on any fiefdoms they’ve been laboriously building up – it’s frequently possible to show, or persuade, Klingons that it really is in their interests to be on your side.

And when this happens, former Klingons may easily become the most zealous supporters of your cause, and plead for a chance to be allowed to join the crew of the Enterprise who are spearheading the really significant improvement that will transform the organisation forever.

Dushen Naidoo is a consultant at Airwave Professional Services, a consultancy that specialises in rapidly delivering performance improvement through process. Airwave Professional Services was founded in 1995 and has carried out significant projects for a wide range of organisations across the private and public sectors. Email: DNaidoo@DecisionFocus.co.uk or telephone 020 7242 7121. www.decisionfocus.co.uk.