

# Creating the Onion model

In a follow-on to last month's article, **Mike Clayton** explains how he created his model for employee engagement

**M**odels are the way that human beings understand the world, and everything we experience. We are constantly building models to explain what we observe, or to predict what we will observe next. Every rule, law, theory, hypothesis, generalisation or process that we make or follow is a model.

Model-making is also one part of the way that science evolves, whether it is hard and mathematical like physics or chemistry, or soft and human like sociology or management. In all cases, practitioners observe, build models and then test them against new observations, looking for points of failure that will lead to new insights. Philosophers build models too. Indeed, they were the first scientists and some continue to test their models robustly, albeit using different methods.

Creating a model is a natural human endeavour, so building the Onion model came easily, as a human being and as a scientist. It is a way to systematise what I have observed, it supports prediction of what my clients and audiences will experience and, perhaps most important to me as

a trainer and communicator, it helps me discuss ideas with other people.

## Developing the Onion model

When we resist change, or reject a new idea, or push back against a sales pitch, or even – dare I say it – become resistant in a training event, we do so for a reason. There are infinitely many reasons, but the Pareto Principle leads us to expect that most instances will be down to variations on a few common reasons. Experience supports this expectation. The model-builder must find these common reasons, to accommodate as much experience as possible within the simplest of frameworks.

So my starting point was to list all of the possible reasons I could think of, from my own experience, knowledge and imagination. Grouping these allowed me to identify the fundamental forms of resistance, although some come in a few different flavours. Of course, even this description is a simplification and, in truth, the model evolved over a number of years; but more of that later.

The next step is to derive a metaphor that neatly expresses the relationship between the fundamental forms of resistance. Most models use either a mathematical, linguistic or visual metaphor.

I rapidly rejected the idea of a mathematical model. They are often used to give a deceptive sense of scientific rigour that my model does not have. I was also aware that Victor Vroom first expressed his Expectancy model<sup>1,2</sup> of motivation as an equation and later regretted it. The result is that one of the simplest, best and most useful management models is little known among managers, while the weak and less useful Hierarchy of Needs model<sup>3</sup> that Abraham Maslow articulated, and that lends itself easily to a simple visual metaphor (most often, a pyramid), is widely known and cited.

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For the Onion model, the result of trial and error was a visual and physical metaphor. I knew the different forms of resistance could be arranged in a sequence that represents a typical escalation in resistance. I also wanted to convey the impression that, as resistance escalates, it gets harder to deal with; or 'hotter'. Having rejected a simple hierarchy, I hit on the metaphor of an onion:

- onions are made up of layers
- as you peel off one layer, there is another beneath
- each layer is more intense, more powerful and hotter than the last
- onions sometimes make you cry.

This seemed to me to be an apposite metaphor both physically and visually (concentric layers). The concentric rings image also has the merit of being less widely used than others, like the iceberg, ladder or pyramid.

### Creating the original model

I originally developed the Onion model as a way of discussing resistance to change in my consulting, training and seminars. It was well received and evolved over time, reaching its current form in around 2005. It has withstood a lot of scrutiny.

The original inspiration was a seminar I attended in the late 1990s, led by Rick Maurer<sup>4</sup>. I made a note at that seminar that there are three levels of resistance to change:

**Level 1: informational resistance**

**Level 2: emotional resistance**

**Level 3: exceptional resistance.**

These are my words, not Rick's, but they captured what I understood to be the essence of his argument. I am also unsure whether he intended to prescribe a sequence to them. As I worked with clients, observed change and discussed these ideas, I started to understand these levels better and to split them into different cases. I re-labelled them and looked for patterns and commonalities. My understanding grew and I became clearer in the way I was able to articulate that understanding. I slowly developed a mature, five-layer Onion model.

I also developed a standard set of labels for the layers of the onion that wholly eschewed jargon, technical language and pseudo-science. I wanted a language that was really simple, so I decided to label each layer with the examples I was giving to illustrate them: the typical thing that you might hear a resister say. So, finally, here were my five layers. →

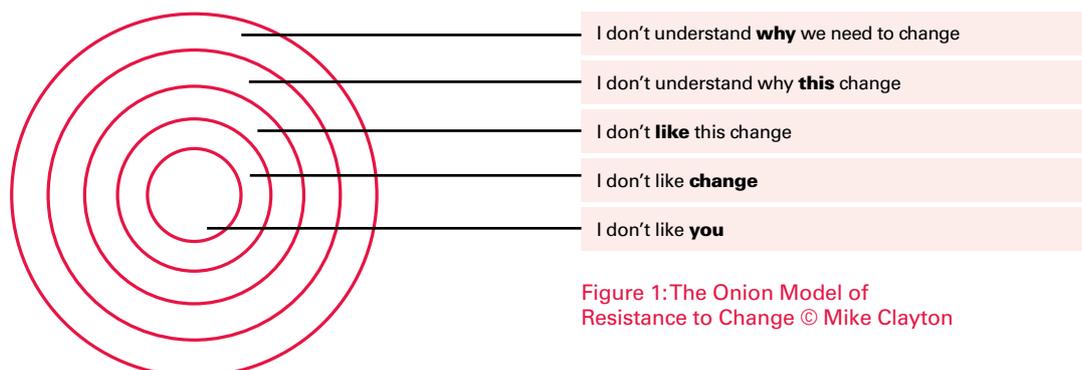


Figure 1: The Onion Model of Resistance to Change © Mike Clayton



It was working with one particular client, where there were serious flaws in the management, that led me to the final, sixth layer, at the core of the onion: “*I like to resist.*” I recognised that resistance is the default behaviour of some people and, thus, the final component of the model slotted into place.

It was on a Transactional Analysis course that I was able to discuss this with an expert and learn more about its origins and nature of this behaviour.

### **From one model to many...**

It was around 2004 when a client asked me to extend a presentation skills programme to offer advanced workshops and coaching to small groups. Among their particular challenges, one came up again and again: hostile audiences. The nature of their business and the presentations they needed to give meant that in their audiences were often professionals from other organisations who had a good reason to criticise their work. My client’s team needed to handle adversarial challenges to their work.

In building a toolkit of skills and methods to offer participants, I wanted to give a way that a speaker could diagnose quickly and accurately the nature of the resistance he was getting. With this, he could adapt his response to handle the challenge effectively. I started playing with the Onion model to derive a version adapted to resistance to ideas in a presentation. It worked splendidly. Participants were quickly able to discern what lay behind an audience challenge and refer swiftly to effective techniques to handle it positively and courteously. I now had two Onion models.

The third came much more quickly. It was an ad hoc response to a question about sales objections during a consulting skills course. Asked how to handle objections, I responded that “*it depends on the*

*nature of the objection*”. You can guess where I went from there. The group found solutions as I fed their examples into a six-layer framework, and I codified the Sales Resistance Onion model there and then: they loved it!

The string of onion models is at five now. I pitched *The Handling Resistance Pocketbook*<sup>5</sup> to the editor of Management Pocketbooks and developed the fourth, for resistance to formal learning, as a part of the outline I prepared. The fifth appeared in last month’s *Training Journal*, as the Onion Model of Resistance to Engagement<sup>6</sup>.

### **... and back to one model**

The editing process is rigorous for such a tight format as Management Pocketbooks, where every word must count. Sadly for me, the Onion Model of Resistance to Formal Learning was left on the editor’s floor. The biggest challenge, however, was when Ros, my editor, asked for a single, unifying language for all of the Onion models. The “*I don’t...*” format meant that each onion had its own labels for each level, reflecting the context.

I had never actively thought about the unifying concept behind each level. I knew intuitively that it was there but, by rejecting simplistic labels and jargon, I had avoided taking the time to figure out what they were. But this was a task I relished. It allowed me to wrestle with underlying concepts and play with words: lovely. Some words were easy to find; others were a struggle. I worried for a long time – and still do – that too many people will be unfamiliar with the word enmity (and that I will misspell it!). I also worried that people will misread content (what’s in it) as content (feeling comfortable). In the text, I could be clear about meanings but, in a simple graphic, there is scope for confusion.

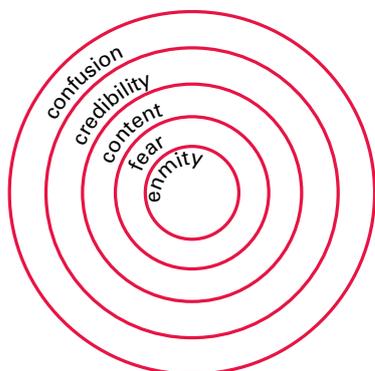


Figure 2: The generic Onion model of resistance  
© Mike Clayton

This does allow me to point out that, while the best models need no explanation, very few are that good. Always read the instructions on the tin. A great example is Tuckman's model of group formation<sup>2</sup> – the words he chose are so simple that people interpret them for themselves, without reading his research.

### Is the Onion model right?

There are three answers to this. Pick whichever you like.

- 1 "Yes, it is right" It works very well in explaining and predicting resistance. It covers a huge proportion of real-world scenarios. Participants, audiences and clients like its insights and simplicity
- 2 "No, it is wrong" It over-simplifies a complex set of human responses and misses out many subtle variations. It fails to predict accurately the progress in some real-world situations
- 3 "That's the wrong question" Models are neither right nor wrong; they are either useful or not. When we apply a useful model in an appropriate domain, it offers valuable insight and usable predictions. In an inappropriate domain, even the best model will fail.

Model-builders try to make the domain in which their model applies as wide as possible. They try to extend their model to greater extremes of experience. And they also try to pare it down to its simplest form. These are conflicting objectives, so model-building is a balancing task. The extent to which a model is 'right' is the degree to which users find the balance of simplicity and subtlety to be useful.

However, there is one thing I must, as a rational scientist, own up to. The Onion model is experientially-based, not founded on empirical evidence. It is backed by my experience and that of many people I have observed, spoken with and learned from. But there is no objective research

evidence to evaluate it. I wish there were and would love the chance to work on this, but I have other calls on my time. It's an awkward confession, but I am also confident in the model's utility.

### The dangers of models

Another experientially-based model with little research evidence is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Grief Cycle<sup>7</sup>. This is coming under scrutiny at the moment and highlights two dangers a model poses. The first applies to experiential models like these and is called the representativeness bias. This bias occurs where we find ourselves seduced by a good explanatory story, which fits our understanding of the world, yet is untested by objective observation. Maybe people find that the grief cycle describes their experience because it makes sense of a confusing set of emotions. Maybe that is true of the Onion model.

The next bias occurs once we have understood a model and are persuaded by it. We can identify experiences that fit into our model and see them as confirming it. The confirmation bias can blind us to disconfirming evidence, or at least lead us to interpret it as aberrant, faulty or a special case.

As a rationalist, I need to expose these concerns and invite comment.

### Is the Onion model the last word?

Of course not. No model is ever complete and dozens of practitioners will, even now, be trying to tinker with it, overhaul it or start afresh. There are always exceptions that fall outside the realm of applicability of a model but William of Ockham would tell us to keep our models simple until we need to make them more complex. Of all the models, hypotheses, theories and laws of nature I studied at university, very few currently have no known exception, nor hints of an exception; perhaps Newton's laws of motion, or the three laws of thermodynamics, do. However, as a physicist, there is only one law I would bet on to be truly universal: Sod's Law. **TJ**

### References

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- 2 Clayton M *The Management Models Pocketbook* Management Pocketbooks Ltd
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- 6 Clayton M "Resistance to engagement" *Training Journal* (August 2011)
- 7 Kübler-Ross E, Kessler D *On Grief and Grieving* Simon & Schuster (2005)

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