

Working with Resistance

Have you ever found yourself faced with a wave of push-back or a wall of resistance to an idea or request for change that seems to you to be perfectly reasonable, rational, legitimate, even a no-brainer?

Well, it does happen and when it does it can be incredibly confusing, puzzling and sometimes frustrating for us, however, in most of these situations, there are real, unexpressed reasons why people resist.

Peter Block (Flawless Consulting) describes in his body of work on resistance, that there are principally two underlying concerns or needs that give rise to expressions of resistance; namely, the need to be in *control* and avoidance of being *vulnerable*. Both of these actually serve an important and useful purpose, they help keep us safe, but when these needs are not met, we go into overdrive and our behaviour becomes dysfunctional and unhelpful.

So Resistance can be defined as “*a natural human reaction to changing situations, which needs to be expressed before new ideas or change are embraced*”.

Some triggers for resistance are:

- A lack information or understanding of the need for, or implications of change.
- A vested interest in things staying the same.
- A perceived sense of threat from the change.
- Concerns or anxieties about the unknown.
- Inability to see another way to ‘solve the problem’ (only one sure way...).
- Fears (real or imagined) of failure or rejection.
- Not feeling listened to.
- Feeling dismissed, attacked, criticised, judged and/or shamed.

These natural human reactions can be appropriately responded to in order to help lower/overcome resistance and help us engage in more productive behaviour. More often than not in these situations, the following responses will result in change being embraced:

- Providing needed information.
- Articulating the positive benefits of embracing the change.
- Dispelling any unrealistic fantasies of threat.
- Filling in the blanks about what the future holds.
- Exploring what success would look like.
- Exploring alternative ways of solving the problem.

Dealing with Resistance

The real challenge with resistance is differentiating between situations where help is needed to embrace change but remain open to the idea of change as indicated above, and those situations when it becomes a repetitive pattern of behaviour, where the primary purpose of the resistance is to (consciously or unconsciously) use it as a strategy to avoid a need to change. This is usually because there is either no felt need to change or there is a fear of change. In the cases where it is a pattern of avoidance, resistance takes many guises, often subtle and indirect.

Our own mind-set is critical when resisting or when faced with resistance in others. In either case it's important to remain open to the idea that this is an opportunity to learn something about ourselves or others. To remain resourceful and able to constructively intervene, we first have to be able to suspend our assumptions and judgements of the manifested behaviour we see in others.

Top tip: Deal in facts, in what you see and hear, not your own interpretation.

Remember, for it to be resistance, it's a sustained pattern you're looking for, not isolated occurrences of behaviour.

There are 3 stages to dealing with resistance:

1. The first stage is recognising what it is. (Given we all resist at times, as you read the following examples, reflect on "what's your favourite guise?")

Here are a few examples of what you might see:

- "Tell me more..." Seeking more and more detail from you to delay action.
- "Love to, but too busy....." Always have too much on their plate.
- "Nothing new"... Tell me something I don't know! Been there, done that..
- "That'll never work..." Your ideas are impractical/unrealistic.
- "...and another thing.." Flood you with unnecessary details/information.
- "Sorry, I misunderstood..." Didn't do what you asked because you were not clear.
- "I did exactly what you said" Compliant and not taking responsibility for their actions.
- "I would if only they did" Moralising or blaming others for their inaction.
- "If we had done it like this..." Blame the process to divert attention away from them.
- "No, I've nothing to add" Silence or passivity, gives you nothing to push or pull against.
- "Another issue is..." Changing the subject places the focus elsewhere.
- "That's not how I see it..." Denial or refusing to consider other perspectives.

2. Having recognised the *guise* of the pattern of resistance you're faced with, the second stage is to *name* or *confront* the resistance in a non-blaming, non-threatening manner. Your intention here is to 'hold up the mirror' to the other person(s), without judgement, in order to prompt a different response from them. When confronted, they may shift to one of the other guises of resistance, but, believe it or not, that is progress. Stick with it and keep holding up the mirror.

Here your influencing skills are called into play. Describe the behaviour you observe and be careful not to ascribe meaning or judgement to that behaviour. Be aware of your Music and Dance, ensuring they are congruent with what you say. Here are a couple of examples:

Blame others - *"I notice that each time we talk about what action you took in this situation, you respond by talking about what others have done. What's behind that?"*

Compliance - *"You seem to be totally willing to do everything I suggest without question, you're giving me no sense of what your thoughts or feelings are about it. What's going on for you?"*

3. The third, and arguably the most difficult stage is, having held up the mirror and confronted the behaviour, to be silent, stay quiet and create space for them to reflect, internalise, process what they have been confronted with and work out their responses. This may take a little time so be patient. Don't be tempted to fill the silence and rescue them from what might feel to you to be an uncomfortable situation; change (of some kind) is taking place in that silence. When they do respond, demonstrate you've heard and deepen your understanding of what they say whilst also paying as much attention to what they don't say and their non-verbal behaviour. Do not agree, disagree or attempt to appease them, instead actively reflect what you've heard. If the pattern persists, be prepared to revisit confronting the behaviour by repeating steps 1, 2 and 3 above as often as required to promote a change.

Reading material

- Flawless Consulting Peter Block
- In Sheep's Clothing George Simon, Jr. Ph.D
- Assertiveness At Work Ken & Kate Back
- Handling Resistance Pocketbook Dr Mike Clayton
- Resistance and Power in Organisations John. M. Jermier, David Knight, Walter R. Nord
- Resistance and Persuasion Eris S. Knowles, Jay A. Linn

Additional Resources