RESOLVING RESISTANCE

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AN EXAMPLE OF RESISTANCE RESOLVED

Susan, the Director of Human Resources at a large paper company, was leading a project to implement self-directed work teams in her organization. She asked me to help with some resistance she was getting.

"Most people are really excited about what we're doing," she said. "But then there are the resisters. They don't want anything to do with teams. Mostly, the resisters are the people who have been here more than twenty years. Every time they come to a meeting, I already know what they are going to say." As she said this, she made a motion of pushing away with her hands.

I said, "Instead of calling these folks 'resisters,' suppose you think of them as people who are resisting this change at this time."

She sat in silence for minute, then looked at me and said, "Wow. That makes a big difference. When I think of them as resisters, it's as if I have them all figured out, that they're just resistant to change. When I think of them as resisting this change at this time, I see them more as people. Maybe they have reasons for resisting."

I said, "Now, instead of thinking of them as *resisting* the change, what if you think of them as *responding* to it?"

Again she went silent. After a moment, she said, "Thank you. Now I know what I need to do."

I talked with Susan several months later. She had met several times with the "resisters," and focused on listening carefully to what they had to say. After a few long discussions, together they came up with an idea that worked for everyone. These company veterans would become mentors. When new people joined the organization, the mentors would help them to learn "how we work in teams around here."

REALITIES OF RESISTANCE

For someone to resist your request to change, two conditions are necessary. First, you and the other person must have differing points of view about the change. Second, the other person must be in control of whether to change. To remove resistance, you must remove one condition or the other.

The harsh reality of resistance is that, no matter how much you may wish otherwise, you can not control the other person. Whether you are advising some behavior, or requesting it, or demanding it, the other person gets to decide how to respond. Nothing you can do will change this condition.

Fortunately, there is also a hopeful reality of resistance. It is sometimes possible to change a point of view, either your own or another person's. You may be able to bring the other person to your point of view, in which case the person does what you ask. Or you may learn something that leads you to adopt the other person's point of view, in which case you stop asking the person to change. Or by working together, the two of you may end up at a third point of view, different from where either of you started. In each of these cases, the resistance has vanished.

If you want to resolve resistance, you must build a shared point of view with the person you are asking to change. One way to do this is to explain your viewpoint so clearly, brilliantly, and persuasively that the other person is won over. A problem with this method is that it requires you to know what information the other person would find clear, brilliant, and persuasive. Another problem is that people are not always open to being convinced.

A more reliable method is the one Susan used. Begin by trying to understand the other person's point of view. You will learn important information about the person, about the environment, about your change, or about yourself. Whatever you learn, the information will give you new options for resolving the resistance. As Susan discovered, you may end up with a resolution better than anything you had expected.

RESISTANCE AS A RESOURCE

Begin your search for understanding with the responses you have received. Each response, even a response that offers resistance, is a valuable resource for you. Each response contains information, clues about the factors influencing the person's decision. When you get resistance, become curious, and look for the information the resistance carries. If you can interpret the clues, you can use what you learn to guide your next steps, and increase your chances of getting what you want.

In order to interpret resistance, it is helpful to understand the factors that people consider as they decide whether to make a change. From asking hundreds of people about their reasons for changing, or not changing, at another person's request, I have identified four key factors:

1. **Expectations** about the change.
2. **Communication** about the change.
3. The **relationship** with the person making the request.
4. Influences from the **environment.**

RESISTANCE AND EXPECTATIONS

Each person's response to a change is unique and personal, based on unique and personal expectations about the change. What seems like an obvious, wonderful idea to one person will seem irrelevant to another, and downright dangerous to a third. If you want someone to change behavior, you must align the change with the person's unique expectations. There are three general strategies for resolving differences in expectations:

1. **Adjust the change** to fit the person's expectations.
2. **Adjust the person's expectations** to support the change.
3. **Adjust your own expectations** about the change.

To implement any of these strategies, you must clearly understand the other person's expectations, and also your own. Motivation for or against a change—or any behavior—is governed by three kinds of expectations:

1. Expectations about **ability**. "Am I able to do the behavior?"
2. Expectations about **results**. "What will be the results?"
3. Expectations about **value**. "Do I want those results?"

Expectations about Ability

Here are some of the reasons people have given me for not making a change that someone had requested of them:

- "I didn't know how to do it."
- "People might find out I can't do it."
- "*I* might find out I can't do it."

These reasons have to do with ability. More accurately, they have to do with *expectations* about ability. My friend Louise invited me many times to go sport kayaking, navigating white water rapids in a one-person rubber raft called a "duckie." For years, I declined, fearing that I did not have the skill I would need, or that I would look foolish. One day, feeling adventurous, I accepted Louise's invitation. After some brief training by an expert guide, we set off down the river. Several times during the day, I fell out of my duckie and did a little freestyle white water swimming. But by the end of the day, I was shooting the rapids with at least a little skill, and I yelled with exhilaration as I splashed through the longest, most treacherous rapids at the end of the day.

I had declined Louise's invitations for so long not because I was unable to survive the rapids, but because I feared I would be unable. My reluctance came from my expectations, not from my actual ability.

It is often difficult to uncover people's expectations about their ability to do what you ask. People were willing to express the reasons I listed above only in a safe setting. In most cases having to do with ability, though people were willing to tell me their reasons for not changing, they did not tell the person who had made the request. Instead, they invented a plausible, acceptable reason ("That will never work here."), or walked away without making a clear commitment, or simply refused.

Sometimes people will tell you that they do not know how to do what you ask, or how to do it well. In those cases, your options are clear. Offer opportunities to build skill and knowledge, or adjust your request so that it falls within people's abilities, or make the environment safer, so that "failure" is acceptable.

If you suspect that expectations about ability lie unspoken behind someone's reluctance, do not push. Expectations about ability are deeply personal and often difficult for people to admit, even to themselves. One possibility is to frame your request as an experiment, something for people to try, to see what happens. In this case, make sure the environment is safe for experiment and play, so that mistakes are not too costly.

Expectations about Results

People will often tell you what results they expect, as in these common responses:

- "That will never work here."
- "That would cost too much money."
- "We tried that at my last company, and it didn't work."

When the response directly expresses a person's expectations about results, ask questions to explore the expectations more fully. What will stop this from working here? How much money do you think

it will cost? What, exactly, did you try at your last company? What was the situation there? What happened? What went wrong? What might have been done differently to make it work better?

Compare what you learn to your own expectations. If they differ, ask how the person arrived at his or her conclusions. Think about, and describe, how you arrived at your conclusions. Notice what assumptions you and the other person are making, and negotiate a mutually satisfactory way to test them.

Sometimes people are reluctant to change not because of what they expect to happen, but because they do not know what to expect. Family therapist Virginia Satir said that people prefer the familiar over the comfortable. When you ask people to try something new, you are asking them to step away from the familiar. Even if the current situation is uncomfortable, people at least know what to expect. Whatever people have been doing up until now, it has been working, at least to some extent. People are less likely to make a change when they do not have reasonably clear expectations about what will happen.

Some responses clearly express this uncertainty:

- "Tell me again, how will this work?"
- "I don't understand how that will make a difference."

If you hear a question, as in the first example, go ahead and describe your own expectations about the change. In some cases, this will resolve the resistance. In others, it will give you and the other person a stronger basis for exploring the differences in your expectations.

The second example is not necessarily an invitation for you to explain. Offer to describe what you expect and why. If the person does not accept your offer, perhaps something is going on other than (or in addition to) uncertainty about what will happen. This is a good time to make sure you are communicating effectively. The Resistance and Communication section gives ideas for testing communication.

If there are aspects of your change about which you are uncertain, acknowledge the unknowns, and invite people to explore the possibilities with you. If you are completely certain about your change, try thinking of three things that might go wrong. If you can't think of at least three things, then you do not understand the change (Weinberg 1985, 81).

Expectations about Value

Often, responses will tell you clearly what people value. For example:

- "It's time consuming."
- "It would cost too much money."
- "I don't want dishpan hands."

These responses tell you that the person considers time, money, or soft, smooth hands to be valuable, and expects the change to put that value in danger. When you hear such clear statements of value, check your expectations. Would this change consume time? Would it cost money? Would it cause dishpan hands? Use the techniques in the previous section to explore and resolve differences in the results you expect.

Even when you and the other person expect the same results, you may value those results differently. For example, you may agree that the change will save time and cost money, but disagree

about whether the time saved is worth the extra cost. This is especially important if the people who will benefit from the saved time are not the people who will be paying the extra cost.

There are several ways to cope with the losses people expect from a change:

1. **Convert the Loss to a Gain**. Adjust the change to increase the value of concern, rather than threatening it. Susan's work to turn the "resisters" into mentors is an example. Instead of being excluded from the plans for change—a loss of participation and control—the company veterans created a role for themselves that provided greater participation and control.
2. **Maintain the Value**. Adjust the change so that it does not create a loss. One possibility that is almost always available is to choose not to change.
3. **Restore the Value**. Adjust the change so that the value is restored in time. For example, show how time spent now will be repaid by time saved later, or how money spent now will be repaid in more money later.
4. **Compensate.** Provide a gain in some other value to offset the loss. Do not assume that you know what compensation people will consider to be comparable. An example is the penalty clause in a construction contract, requiring a contractor to pay a fee if the building is completed late.
5. **Limit the Loss**. Adjust the change to limit how much value is lost. For example, upgrade the company's e-mail servers on the weekend, when fewer people will be affected by the down time.
6. **Acknowledge the Loss.** If there will be a loss, acknowledge it. Acknowledgement is important even if you can restore, limit, or compensate for the loss, and crucial if none of those alternatives is possible.

Ultimately, every response to a request is based on values. Even if I believe I will be unable to do what you ask, I might try it anyway if the potential losses are small, or the potential gains large. Even if I do not know what results to expect, I might try the change anyway if I can feel assured that I will not lose anything of great value. If you get resistance due to expectations about ability or results, consider trying some of the suggestions for coping with loss.

RESISTANCE AND COMMUNICATION

In order to understand another person's expectations, you must communicate effectively. You must see and hear clearly, interpret the person's words and actions accurately, and also make sure you are being heard clearly and accurately.

Seeing and Hearing Clearly

I once watched a man at an airport set off the alarm as he walked through the security scanner. A security guard led the man a few feet to a table, and scanned him with a wand, which beeped. With a heavy accent, the security guard said, "Teck out the change from your pokket." The man removed his change, and put it on the table.

The security guard again waved the wand, and again it beeped. "Remoof your belt bockle," he said. The man sighed heavily, removed his belt, which had a large metal buckle, and stood holding his pants up with both hands.

A third pass of the wand, a third beep. The security guard said, "Teck off your pents!"

"What!?" the man shouted. "Take off my pants?! Are you crazy? I'm in the middle of an airport!"

"No, no, no! Not your *pants*, your *pents!*" the security guard said, pointing to the pens in the man's shirt pocket. "Teck off your pents from your pokket!"

If you don't hear clearly what a person is saying, it is hard to get the meaning right. When you get a puzzling or troubling response, make sure you heard it correctly. Ask yourself The Data Question: "What did I see and hear?" (Weinberg 1993, 91). Then ask whether what you heard is what the other person said. "Did you tell me to take off my pants?"

Interpreting Accurately

Even when I hear correctly, I do not always get the meaning right. Perhaps I inherited this shortcoming. My grandparents never changed their clocks to Daylight Savings Time, because, they said, "We don't want to stay up until two o'clock in the morning."

If you don't get the meaning right, it is hard to respond appropriately. The simplest way to test your interpretations is to tell the person what meaning you made, and ask whether you got it right. "Do you mean you want me to stay up until 2:00 am to change all my clocks?"

The Rule of Three Interpretations is a guideline for understanding meaning (Weinberg 1993, 90). This rule says, "If I can't think of at least three different interpretations of what I received, I haven't thought enough about what it might mean." Before responding to any one meaning, think of at least two other possible meanings.

For example, imagine that you have asked Albert, a project manager to write a risk management plan, and he replied, "But this is just a small project." Here are three possible meanings of Albert's response:

1. I don't want to think about what might go wrong.
2. The risks on a small project are so small or so few that there is no need to manage them.
3. The cost of developing a risk management plan is too high for a small project.

Now you can work with Albert to confirm or correct your interpretations.

Another interpretation tool is Miller's Law, which says, "To understand what another person is saying, you have to assume that it is true and try to imagine what it might be true of." (Elgin 1995, 15). To apply Miller's Law, ask yourself, "If what the person said were true, what else would have to be true? Under what circumstances would it be true? In order for me to believe that, what else would I have to believe?" The answers you get are *presuppositions*, the unstated, but implied, meanings in what someone says. Presuppositions always carry information about the person's expectations or beliefs.

Suppose you have asked Betty to institute a system of design reviews for her project, and she says, "No way! We're *already* behind schedule!" In order for this statement to be true, what else would have to be true? First, there would have to be a schedule. Second, Betty would have to know the current state of the project compared to the schedule. Further, the statement make senses *as an answer to your request* only if instituting design reviews would put the project even further behind schedule. Once you are aware of the presuppositions, ask whether Betty meant to imply them. For example, you might ask, "Do you mean that design reviews would put you even further behind schedule?" If you got the meaning wrong, work with Betty to correct it.

Repeat this cycle of listening, validating, and correcting until the other person agrees that you have heard and understood the message. Then ask, "Is there more that you want to say?" Repeat until the person feels fully heard and understood.

Being Understood

If someone hears or interprets what you say incorrectly, they may respond in a way that puzzles you. Check to see what, exactly, the person is responding to. Ask, "I'm not sure what you heard me say. Can you repeat it for me?" Depending on what you hear, either confirm the person's interpretation, or send your message again, perhaps using different words.

Repeat the cycle of listening, validating, speaking, and validating until you and the other person both agree that you have been fully heard and understood. Then, if appropriate, work to resolve the differences in your points of view.

RESISTANCE AND YOUR RELATIONSHIP

When you speak with someone, your relationship enters the conversation before your words do. Relationships affect the way you interpret people's words and behavior, and the way they interpret yours. In order to understand people's real expectations about a change, you must relate to them in a way that supports clear communication.

Here are some reasons people have chosen not to change, based on their relationships with the people requesting the changes:

- "I didn't want to give the person the satisfaction."
- "I didn't like the way they asked. They *demanded* it of me."
- "I thought, 'Why should I listen to *you*?'"

Reasons like these can be especially difficult to resolve, because they are often left unspoken. Though resistance due to relationships is common, people do not often come right out and say, "I don't want to give you the satisfaction." More likely, they will quietly ignore your request, agree to do what you ask and then not follow through, invent an acceptable reason for refusing, play dumb, or any of a hundred other possibilities. If people are talking to you, even if they are resisting, that is a usually a good sign. When they stop talking to you, examine your relationship.

One effective test of a relationship is to notice how you think and feel about the other person. Susan, the paper company Human Resources Director, got stuck partly because of the way she was thinking about people. Only when she stopped seeing them as "resisters" was she able to hear what they had to say and make progress with the change.

You also can use Miller's Law to test your relationship. Miller's Law asks you to temporarily imagine that what the other person is saying is true. You need not believe what you are being told, but you must assume that the speaker believes it. If you have trouble assuming that people believe what they are telling you, you have a relationship problem.

A healthy relationship includes these elements:

1. The shared purpose—or at least the mutually compatible purposes—that form the basis for the relationship.
2. Roles that describe each person's unique contribution to the relationship.

3. Ground rules for interacting.
4. Interactions.
5. Feedback about what is working and what is not.
6. Commitment to the purpose, roles, and ground rules.

Further, in a healthy relationship, each of these elements is negotiated explicitly, and renegotiated repeatedly. If a person's response to your request, or your reaction to the response, indicates a relationship problem, stop trying to communicate about the change, and work on negotiating the missing elements of the relationship.

Hearing another person fully, as described in the previous section, often helps to create a relationship in which the person is more willing to hear you.

RESISTANCE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

A change will succeed only if the environment supports it fully. The environment must provide:

- Tools, money, staff, and other resources, so that people have the **ability** to make the change.
- Information that is valid, timely, and relevant, so that people know what **results** to expect and what results they are getting.
- Incentives, management attention, and linkage to organizational objectives, so that people experience the **value** of the change.

People's expectations about ability, results, and value are influenced by factors from a number of domains:

- **Social:** culture, organizational structure, peer pressure, friendships, respect.
- **Technical**: tools, communication.
- **Space**: geographical location, distance, size, office space, walls, noise.
- **Historical**: experience with similar changes, lack of experience with similar changes, people's experience with each other.
- **Political**: authority, power, rewards and punishments, formal and informal rules.
- **Personal circumstances**: marriage, birth, death, illness, financial circumstances.

Resistance is often a reaction to the environment. Responses that indicate environmental influence include:

- "It's just a fad. This too will pass."
- "The managers will never go for that."
- "We're too busy."
- "We are not allowed to do that."

These responses indicate insufficient support, insufficient authority, and excess demands from the environment. You can sometimes create a change simply by altering some aspect of the

environment in which people choose their actions. Try to create an environment in which people will choose the make the change.

The most common expression of resistance is "We don't have time for that." This response requires a little bit of interpretation. It is not really about time, it is about priority. People do not have time to do everything they are being asked to do, and they are choosing to spend their limited time on activities to which they give a higher priority. There are two possibilities for resolving this kind of resistance. First, you could try to change the priorities, perhaps by offering information about the consequences of the status quo and the benefits of your change, or by offering incentives. Second, you could work to reduce the demands being placed on people, so that they have sufficient time to do what you ask.

If you can not change the environment, you may have to adjust your change so that it fits into the limits of support that the environment offers.

SUMMARY

People resist change based on their unique, personal expectations. People's responses to your requests carry information about people's expectations. If you create a relationship that supports clean communication, and if you communicate effectively, you can often resolve resistance, and turn it into support for effective, lasting change.

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