

Working with Resistance

While resistance is often a thorn in the side of anyone trying to affect change, it can serve a valuable purpose and create opportunities for even greater improvement.

With the subject of change in the headlines these days, particularly given the mandate that swept Barack Obama to the presidency, perhaps this is a good time to look at the inevitable consequence of change efforts: resistance.

As observed in the science of physiology, every organism has internal regulatory processes aimed at maintaining a stable, constant condition (homeostasis). Executive Coach Sarita Chawla sums up: “Once an organism is in place, its job is to *not change*.”

In other words, resistance is natural. We’ve been engaged in it since the moment we were born. How do we stay healthy? Our immune system fends off germs. How do we stand upright and walk? We resist gravity.

Resistance can actually serve a useful purpose. Try working out without it. You can raise your arms a thousand times and not develop strength. Do it with weights, and you get a muscle that will impress your grandchildren.

The positive contributions of

resistance aren’t just physical. For example, as children we may have gone to Sunday school. So long as we interacted with others in the same congregation, belief was easy. But the first time we bumped into someone from a different tradition, we encountered resistance to our way of thinking. That gave us the opportunity to explore, to reflect, to clarify what truly mattered to us.

Trite though it sounds, resistance really does represent an opportunity rather than a problem. It can alert the change leader to areas that need attention, situations that may require further thought, ways to use resources that have been overlooked. Think of resistance as a stop sign—not a signal to give up,

but a reminder:

“Heads up! Lots going on here; potential dangers all around. Pay attention, and proceed with extra care.”

So why does resistance usually get such a bad rap? In our drive to achieve goals, we may overlook the first murmured objections and hack our way through

complications, pushing resistance aside. And then...things begin to bog down.

Consultant Lee Gregory provides an engineer’s perspective on the phenomenon: “In electricity terms, resistors are used to reduce the flow of current, with the result that energy is dissipated as heat. In thermodynamic terms, heat is the lowest, least organized form of energy (compare, for example, heat radiating from a resistor to the organized energy of a laser). Similarly, in a change initiative, resistance transforms constructive energy into a less useful form. Note that it doesn’t destroy energy (Newton says you can’t—you can only transform it). But it won’t

reorganize itself into a higher-order form—if you believe in the second law of thermodynamics, which states that all systems in isolation devolve toward their state of maximum entropy. (It’s this phenomenon that explains why your cream mixes into your hot coffee even if you don’t stir it—it’s trending toward maximum entropy or disorder).”



With that in mind, let's think about the essential nature of organizations: They pull people together to tackle something that takes more energy than any single person can muster. Team members are selected in a process that looks at their experience and expertise, which can be viewed as outcomes of how they've invested their time, or their "personal energy deposits." The interviewer is assessing what each individual can contribute so that the organization acquires appropriate "energy resources."

Once all that energy is assembled, the organization can't destroy it, it can only channel or transform it. In this context, the leader's job is to identify necessary "personal energy resources" and then allocate and direct them in the most productive manner. If the leader doesn't do those things well, the energy will turn negative, dissipating in apathy or transforming into office politics, sabotage, and all the unhelpful places in between.

The mere awareness that resistance is to be expected makes it easier to avert its worst consequences. But when resistance is really gumming up the works, you can be sure that individuals' egos have gotten involved.

Recently I went to the beach and observed a group of pelicans in flight just above the waves. The wind blew strong enough that it could have knocked them off their intended course. But they didn't merely resist the wind until they exhausted themselves. Rather, they angled their bodies and tilted their wings; they organized in a formation that minimized the resistance felt by any one of them. They found an *accommodation*

with the contrary force.

It's a condition of living that we will continually encounter external forces, but we can choose how to react. We can go into full-bore resistance—beating our heads against it. On the opposite extreme, we can simply surrender/give up. But the middle way is to *accept* that the external force is there and then find the way to hold our intention and *accommodate* it.

Given that it's natural to work around, if not with, external

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forces, why do we become frustrated or upset when we encounter resistance? What turns resistance into a form of suffering is that we take it personally—something is in the way of or making it harder for us to get or do what we want. "At the heart of resistance is the insistence to have it *my way*," observes Chawla. The pelicans don't take the wind personally; they just adjust. They exert effort but aren't suffering.

If you find yourself frustrated by others' resistance or feel yourself holding out or hanging back, take a deep breath and ask the following questions:

- ◆ To what degree do I want something to happen in a particular way?
- ◆ Is my insistence truly an appro-

priate response to the moment, or am I reacting based solely on old experiences and thoughts?

- ◆ What assumptions or expectations have kicked in? Are these grounded in current realities?
- ◆ How can I transform all the energy that's locked up in resistance to a positive force toward the organization's goal?

However urgent the situation seems to be, steal time to reflect. Get your bearings. Have the confidence that your internal resources and the collective wisdom of your team will deliver fresh thinking and the resolve to overcome obstacles.

Lee Gregory sums up this dynamic of resistance: "Yin-yang forces seem to be in play. On the one hand, the second law of thermodynamics and everything we know about the physical state of the universe says that we're inexorably trending toward the state of maximum entropy, maximum randomness. On the other hand, we see things self-organizing almost spontaneously—like the 9/11 responders, or cities and civilizations, or higher-order creatures evolving from lower order ones.

"As we apply these two ideas to the future of humanity, how does this play out? Does one force triumph over another? Or do both continue playing out their creative-destructive dance ad infinitum?

"Down which channels will our organizations' indestructible energy flow?" **SF**

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