

A Positive Approach to Resistance

In most modern organizations, there is a strong value system that stresses the need for collaboration, cooperation, and trust. Although this viewpoint certainly has much to recommend it, a problem has arisen in that this emphasis on “positive” reactions leads to a tendency to discount “negative” reactions such as competition, anger, and resistance. The reality is that there are no inherently negative reactions.

Given the proper circumstances, every human reaction has the potential to be expressed in an appropriate and effective manner. To discount any reaction when human interaction is concerned is to limit resources and to reduce the range of alternatives that are available. Such limitation is hardly a prescription for individual or organizational growth and effectiveness. There is a time to listen and a time not to listen, a time for contemplation and a time for action, and a time to grow and a time to stand firm. It is always the situation that determines what is appropriate, what is effective, and sometimes even what is ethical.

The reaction that probably is most under fire today is resistance. If cooperation is seen as a universally good reaction, then resistance as its opposite is usually seen as bad or negative. Everyone has heard admonitions such as “Don’t be defensive,” “You’ve got to learn to compromise,” or “You’re thinking of your own welfare.” We need to know when to express resistance, how to express it appropriately so that the results are positive for all of those concerned, and how to deal with another person’s resistance.

The ability to resist can be seen as a personal asset in that it keeps one from being hurt and from overloading oneself. It also allows one to make clearer choices about what is good for oneself, and it helps in blocking out unimportant distractions that would hinder the achievement of one’s goals. Resistance also can be seen as an organizational asset in that it allows systems to differentiate talent, provides new information about what might not work well and produces a lot of needed energy.

Because resistance has traditionally been disvalued, most managers tend to use one or more of the following low-yield strategies to deal with it:

1. Breaking it down. The attempt to break down resistance is usually carried out by threatening, coercing, selling or reasoning.
2. Avoiding it. This strategy is pursued through deflection, “not hearing,” or attempting to induce guilt.
3. Discounting it. This approach involves dismissing the resistance as unimportant, promoting tradition as the alternative to the resistance or appealing to the resister’s need to conform.

Although the low-yield strategies may work to some degree in that they may evoke positive responses from resisters for the moment, they rarely provide lasting solutions

and are often quite costly. In some cases, such as with threats and attempts to induce guilt, they may even produce more and deeper resistance at a later time.

Two basic assumptions underlie a positive approach to dealing creatively with resistance:

1. *Resistance is.* People will always resist, knowingly or not, those things that they perceive as not in their best self-interest.
2. *Resistance needs to be honored.* It must be dealt with in a respectful manner. If resistance is handled from a perspective that incorporates these two assumptions, it becomes an organizational asset and can enhance rather than injure a relationship. Another condition must exist in order for the positive approach to work: the demander—the individual who confronts the resister—must be absolutely clear about what he or she wants from the resister and must be as specific as possible in relating this information to the resister. When the demand is stated in terms of time frames, specific outcomes, potential benefits, concrete behaviors that are needed, and so forth, the probability that the demander will achieve compliance from the resister is great. Even if compliance is not possible, the resistance will become more workable.

The positive approach consists of four separate steps: (1) surfacing, (2) honoring, (3) exploring and (4) rechecking. Each step should be completed before moving to the next step.

After the demander has clearly stated what he or she wants from the other party, the first—and probably most difficult—step is to get the resistance out in the open. Many people intentionally withhold their resistance for a number of reasons: experience with low-yield strategies, mistrust, a poor interpersonal relationship, or a lack of awareness of their own resistance. The surfacing of resistance can be approached easily and effectively by keeping two guidelines in mind:

1. Make the expression of resistance as “safe” as possible. The demander should state clearly—and publicly, if possible—that he or she wants to hear the resistance. It is a good idea to include an explanation of why the resistance is important and to be straightforward. Once the resister is aware that he or she is not going to be attacked, punished, or “sold” on what the demander wants, the demander has a much greater chance of exposing the real source of the resistance.
2. Ask for it all. Listening to a resister’s statement of what he or she does not like about the very thing that the demander wants is rarely a pleasant experience. Nevertheless, it is the best approach to resistance. When the resistance exists, it is much better to hear all of it than to try to work through the situation in partial ignorance.

Honoring involves the following process:

1. **Listen.** When a person states resistance openly, he or she provides the

demanders with a vital source of information about what the demanders want and the potential pitfalls in achieving what is wanted. In addition, the resister is making a personal statement about who he or she is.

Any attempt to discount the information not only stops the information but also carries a clear message to the resister that his or her opinion does not matter; the resister will interpret this to mean that he or she does not matter. It is of critical importance at this stage that the demander makes no attempt to reinforce his or her original position, to sell, to reason, or in any way to imply that the resister should not feel as he or she does. The correct approach is simply to listen.

2. **Acknowledge the resistance.** The act of acknowledgement does not imply that the demander agrees with the point of resistance. It is a simple affirmation of the resister's right to resist. Statements such as "I see how that could be a problem for you" or "You certainly have a right to be concerned" allow the demander to respond to the resister's concern without relinquishing anything. The demander should acknowledge the resistance, but not agree with it.
3. **Reinforce the notion that it is permissible to resist.** The demander should keep in mind that openly resisting in a safe environment may be a new experience for the resister. Periodically reinforcing that the resistance is valuable and that the resister is safe and appreciated for stating his or her resistance creates a positive atmosphere. Statements such as "It's really all right that you don't like all of this" or "I can see why you are angry" maintain the demander's control of the situation while making the environment continually safe for the resister.

Exploring involves the following tasks:

1. **Distinguish authentic resistance from pseudo resistance.** Authentic resistance is directed toward the specific demand that has been made; pseudo resistance is real but has nothing to do with the demand. Pseudo resistance usually originates in feelings such as resentment of authority, old grudges, the need for attention, and lack of clarity about one's desires. The demander's task is to uncover the authentic resistance. If the demander is having difficulty determining which kind of resistance is manifesting itself, he or she can simply ask the resister, "What is your objection?" The resister either will or will not be able to state clearly what the specific objection is. It is best to address the cause of the pseudo resistance later rather than at the moment unless it is blocking progress.
2. **Probe the resistance.** Once the resistance has been surfaced, honored and judged authentic and the resister has realized that he or she is safe, the demander can help the resister to assume a proactive stance by simply asking, "What would you prefer?" In responding to this question, the resister works with the demander toward the objective rather than against it. The resister will suggest alternative approaches to meeting the demand in ways that provide the demander with what is wanted and permit the resister to obtain something for him or herself at the same time. At this point it is a good idea to encourage

negotiation and to keep in mind that something must change positively for the resister in order for the resistance to be permanently reduced. The end point of probing should be the development of some kind of agreement about the action to be taken.

Before the meeting is over, the last step is to recheck the status of the current resistance and the agreements that have been made. This step is essential because it provides closure to the issue and ensures that no agreement will be forgotten. If there is to be a second meeting, rechecking provides a basis on which to start the next meeting so that the entire process of dealing with the resistance does not have to be repeated.

The demander should always keep the following points in mind when confronted with a resister:

1. The objective is not to eliminate all resistance because it is not possible to do so. Instead, the objective is to work with and reduce the needless resistance. The reduction is usually enough to allow proceeding with the demand effectively.
2. Always keep paper and pencil handy to make notes during the process. When the problem is recorded, the resister's objection is honored and there is less chance that important points will be forgotten. Making notes also facilitates the last step, rechecking.
3. Once the resistance is at a workable level, thank the resister and move on. It is important not to try to persuade the resister to like the demand. It is enough that the resister is willing to agree to it.

This approach has universal application. It can be used in any situation in which resistance is an issue, such as in managing conflict, scheduling work, or implementing new systems.

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