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NOT RESISTING RESISTANCE

OFTEN, THE FIRST IMPULSE IS TO PUSH BACK ON RESISTANCE.

Resistance is a normal part of organizational change. Everyone resists something at one time or another. Even if a change is desirable, it can elicit resistance. All of this is just human.

Resistance is usually not easy to deal with. Leaders can be pulled into a variety of reactions which are unhelpful. This article will focus on the quite normal and common initial impulse to push back, oppose or "resist the resistance." This can manifest as an attempt to convince, to reason against, to provide data and logic or to insist based on authority or policy.

This does not mean leaders should avoid taking a position. Leaders have to exercise authority even if it makes some people unhappy. The problem is that acting *out of* the first impulse to push back will risk escalating a feeling of being in a struggle.

STAYING IN THE MODE OF STRUGGLE RISKS MAKING EVERYONE LOSERS.

Change in organizations often means change in attitudes, roles, ways of relating, habits and patterns. This is not easy--feelings of loss of control, insecurity and other fears naturally arise.

Quickly pushing back on resistance can make people feel even more vulnerable. Even if the leader offers the most cogent data and arguments, people can feel like their concerns are not heard, perhaps not respected.

In such circumstances people are likely to resist even more or withdraw. Resistance can go underground. Compliance hides disengagement. Outcomes may improve temporarily but sustainability is at risk. The chances for future partnership, creativity, and engagement are undermined. The leader overcomes resistance but loses in the long run.

IN THE MIDST OF STRUGGLE, CULTIVATE CALMNESS.

Resistance is like an oncoming force against us. We can learn about managing force from judo. Opposing force with force risks causing damage. The judo expert highly values maximum benefit, minimum harm. An attitude of calmness is cultivated to avoid the instinctual reaction to counterattack and, instead, to align *with* the momentum, to move *with* it.

Unlike judo, in organizational life, we do not want our employees immobilized, "flat on the mat." We want them walking with us in partnership, towards mutual goals. The value of maximum benefit, minimize harm still applies. In this case, the moves are psychological.

FIRST, BE MALLEABLE BY LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING.

To psychologically "move with" the force of resistance means to listen, to assure understanding by asking questions and repeating back. The skills are those of active listening and empathy.

"Moving with" also means suspending judgment to listen in a more unbiased and open way. It means allowing opportunity to be influenced. After all, leaders in complex systems cannot know everything. Resistance may indicate misunderstanding, gaps in thinking or flaws in design.

NEXT, APPLY STRENGTH WHILE PRESERVING RESPECT AND AUTONOMY.

As in judo, leaders need more than one move to achieve results. Exercise of strength through authority is essential. But, research and experience have shown that a sense of autonomy, empowerment, feeling heard and feeling respected are all more likely to be achieved if:

- people feel that you understand sincerely what they are feeling
- authority is explicitly in service of deep commitment to vision and goals rather than a desire to control others
- you acknowledge the risks and downsides of your decision
- you show how you have been influenced by the resistance
- you emphasize the opportunity for people to exercise choices within the decision

CASE EXAMPLE: SENIOR LEADERS SHOW BOTH MALLEABILITY AND STRENGTH.

The senior leaders of an organization decide that customer service employees currently dispersed across two divisions must be centralized and have a higher level of education and experience. They have a vision of greater cost-efficiency, better quality and simplicity of access.

The two divisional directors, Jan and Jim, are upset and angry. Not only were they not consulted, they will lose highly valued in-person, local relationships between customer service and divisional staff. Jan and Jim state the change will be a mess. The senior leaders:

- agree the lack of consultation was an error and express respect for the directors
- acknowledge the loss of valued, in-person relationships
- acknowledge they had not fully anticipated the risks of this loss
- reiterate their vision and goals and stick to their decision
- ask the directors to create a design team with employees to address the risks

Over several months, despite efforts of the senior leaders, Jim remains critical and obstructive. He simply cannot get over his anger at not being consulted. He is ultimately let go. While Jan is initially unhappy, she feels like she has at least been heard. She volunteers to lead the design team and, to her surprise, they find ways to mitigate the loss of in-person relationships. Jan becomes a strong proponent of the change.

ALLOW OPPORTUNITY FOR THE UNEXPECTED TO EMERGE.

Responding to resistance is complex and nuanced. It requires substantial self awareness "in the moment" to be both malleable and assertive. As in the case example, success is a matter of degree, not perfection. Self awareness is helped by personal reflection, collegial consultation and coaching. Facilitating open dialogue with resistors can lead to the unexpected. In the case example, a decision was revised to address unforeseen risks. But, an entirely new idea might also emerge out of holding opposing ideas--perhaps something transformational.