

Revisiting Resistance



One reader is a manager who wants to change her unit's culture, but she is encountering stubborn resistance. Another has a vocal employee who is negatively influencing others. The third reader wants to inspire nurses to become reengaged.

What do these Coaching Forum readers have in common? *Each has the chance to develop rapport and renewed commitment with those who are resisting.*

Is this a desirable outcome every time? No. Sometimes it is appropriate for the manager to get tough and/or for the employees to move on. But in these instances, let's assume that each of these readers can create a positive outcome that engages nearly everyone. Let's say the unit culture *is* in need of change and that most staff members perceive this need. Let's say that the disaffected employee was once a star performer. Let's say that until recently, the nurses were satisfied with their positions.

How do we approach others when they resist our direction? One common leadership strategy is to become more determined. We hold meetings and retreats in which we give more data and tell compelling stories. We offer supporting evidence, and we invoke the organizational mandate. No matter what the particulars are, our strategy is to provide more information so others will better understand our position. *We believe that more data will persuade people.*

A second approach is to dig in and insist. Rather than the more subtle educational campaign described above, we move forward with a heavier hand. This is also known as the "this is the way we are going to do it" approach. We know this is not the best leadership choice, but we may opt for it anyway. We might be frustrated. We might be out of time. We might simply need to shut down disagreement and move ahead.

Any of these approaches can be successful. Yet choosing these paths too frequently can limit our learning and may stem from an *emotional* truth—we *are* resisting the resistance. We simply don't want to hear the complaining or experience the difficulty of

talking with people who are not signing up for our point of view. The good news is that this reaction is entirely human!

So, is it possible to be human and to experience our own reluctance to engage with negativity but still move beyond these instincts? Can we explore the wisdom, if any, that resistance offers us?

I had a wise mentor who once divided "resisting complainers" into two camps. Both types, she said, are truly committed people. The first are those who are committed to complaining! Regrettably for them and for others, these people are perpetually unhappy and continually vocal. It's the second category that holds lessons for us. These are the people who are committed to something they fear losing. In nursing, it may be a professional value they hold dear. It may be a nursing practice they feel is threatened or compromised.

Let's reconsider our readers' challenges. The first is facing stubborn opposition from those on the unit who do not want change. What if this manager were to momentarily set aside her own negative emotional response to what they are saying and how they are saying it? What if she were to create a safe environment in which they could honestly explore their concerns? What if she approached them with an open mind and genuine willingness to listen?

If she were to do this, she could learn a lot. It is possible she will hear that they are afraid of losing something. Perhaps it is their autonomy. Perhaps they are concerned about giving up habits the organization once tolerated but can no longer afford.

If she is able to listen openly, she may hear valuable kernels of truth. This does not mean she will agree with *all* their points. But she may agree with and *focus on* some of them. She may hear concerns she too would have if she were in their position. She may hear ways in which the organization has, perhaps inadvertently, enabled them to develop these views.

Listening differently may help her realize that the organization is partially responsible

for their concerns. She may even decide to publicly state the organization's share of accountability for the past, while maintaining the need to move forward.

As they discuss their concerns, she may hear values she and they *mutually* share. She could build on these mutual values and skillfully shift the conversation from what they don't want to what they *do* want. Together, they can craft a solution that will build on what is important to *all* of them. Together, they can move ahead.

What if the other two leaders were to have similar conversations? There is no question that this is courageous work, but it is immensely worthwhile and can begin with several simple steps. First, these leaders would honor but not succumb to their own unpleasant experience of resistance. They would momentarily set aside their feelings of "being right." They would assess these individuals. What types of resisters are they? Are they committed to complaining, or are they committed to values they feel are compromised or threatened? Are they fearful of change? What is behind their fear? Has the organization in some way contributed to their past experience and their current beliefs?

A leader's private assessment cannot reveal the answers to all these questions, but it can steer her in the right direction. A courageous leader can explore such concerns with an open mind and an open heart. If our leader is able to listen with genuine interest, she may be able to identify values they *all* hold closely. New solutions can surface. At the very least, new understanding and greater trust will emerge.

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