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What Does “No” Really Mean?

Not long ago, my colleague Jennifer visited a hospital that had engaged our team to work with their nursing leaders. Jennifer was convening a voluntary “brown bag” luncheon to check in with the program participants. She also promised to review a key program activity as the meeting ended.

Jennifer enjoyed good relationships with these leaders, and this meeting was no exception. They began with a lively discussion of their most recent challenges. The economy was playing havoc with hospital finances and their individual budgets. This forum gave the leaders the chance to speak their minds candidly and in heartfelt ways. They faced significant leadership trials, and over the coming months, they wanted help to keep their staff members engaged, even as they themselves were anxious about economic uncertainties.

A few minutes before the meeting ended, Jennifer shifted the dialogue to a key program activity that was planned for the next several months. She spoke with the same easy, honest tone that had prevailed previously. No sooner had she started speaking than she noticed a decided shift in the room. The participants, who had been completely engaged just minutes before, fell silent. Despite Jennifer’s attempts to make a smooth transition, she could not reignite a compelling conversation. Instead, she faced people who appeared bored, complacent, and unavailable. They all seemed to be saying, “I am not interested in what you are saying, and I am resisting it completely.”

There are many Coaching Forum readers who experience circumstances like Jennifer’s. What do we do when we find ourselves before an audience of “resisters”? Many leaders say that their emotions kick in right away, and visibly or invisibly, they react as if their good ideas have been summarily rebuked. They may feel that they have been rejected personally. Egos become ensnared, and stated or unstated conflict blossoms. Emotions are stirred, and the leader’s effectiveness is compromised.

So what should we do when we encounter resistance? One good option is to mentally review a model that Rick Mauer describes on his Web site¹ and in the book, *Beyond the*

Wall of Resistance.² Mauer talks about three levels of resistance:

- “I don’t get it.” When people don’t understand something, they can demonstrate resistance in a variety of ways. They may hide their lack of comprehension or appear confused, angry, stubborn, or uninterested.
- “I don’t like it.” People may understand a proposal quite well, but they don’t like it. As leaders, it is important to remember that when people don’t like what we want to do, it may be because our new way forward represents a threat or a loss to them.
- “I don’t like you.” In this case, for whatever reason, the personal relationship between the leader and those resisting is damaged. There are many possible causes. Two options are that the leader has not listened or the other individuals think that the leader does not care about their viewpoints.

How can Jennifer use this information to move through the resistance she experienced?

- Based on evidence before and after the meeting, Jennifer determined that her personal relationship with the other leaders was intact.
- Jennifer concluded that these leaders exhibited a combination of two forms of resistance: “I don’t get it” and “I don’t like it.” Some participants may not have seen the relevance between the project she was talking about and the serious leadership challenges they were facing. Therefore, it was up to Jennifer to ensure that the assigned task could encompass their concerns and to communicate how that could happen.
- Still others may have been clear on what Jennifer proposed and wanted no more information. They had already decided that Jennifer’s task was off-target and irrelevant. Again, it was up to Jennifer to make sure she was successful in engaging them and hearing their concerns. She also needed to work together with the leaders to ensure that the task was accomplished while simultaneously meeting their own legitimate needs.

What can we learn from Jennifer’s circumstances?

1. Ignoring the urge to respond instantly is smart. When we are in the action of leader-

- ship and experience resistance, it is tempting to decide quickly what the resistance means and implement a solution immediately. But, if we can slow our responses down even for a moment, we can consider what that “no” really means. Taking a moment to reflect gives us more options than going forward with a knee-jerk response that is off-target.
2. Resistance provides us with important feedback. We are wise to pay attention to resistance and the message it contains. We may not agree with any part of the message or choose to validate it in any way, but it is still important to consider its meaning.
 3. Resistance has many faces. Confusion, denial, sabotage, soliciting the support of others who sympathize, engaging in passive-aggressive behavior, needing more and more information—all these are potential symptoms of resistance.
 4. We can correctly diagnose the type of resistance we are experi-

encing. Do people really need more information? What if they have enough information to know that they don't like our “solution” because they don't perceive its value or relevance?

5. There are nearly always (at least) two sets of needs operating: theirs and ours. In this instance, Jennifer realized that the participants needed to be heard: how were they going to be good leaders in such a tough climate? Her own needs called for crafting a successful leadership development activity. She could be successful easily by accommodating both sets of needs.

Jennifer re-examined the project with the team at their next meeting. What could have become immovable group resistance eventually transformed into a palpable commitment to an engaging peer-learning activity. The group went on to truly embrace Jennifer's “project,” especially when they personally experienced the spot-on leadership support it generated.

Their initial resistance relaxed into acceptance, generosity, and mutual support. This happened because the group was willing to reconsider their initial reactions, and because as their leader, Jennifer recrafted her approach to directly and honestly address the group's needs and concerns.

References

1. The resources you need to lead change...without resistance. Maurer & Associates Web site. <http://www.beyondresistance.com>. Accessed December 16, 2009.
2. Mauer R. *Beyond the Wall of Resistance: Unconventional Strategies That Build Support for Change*. Austin, TX: Bard Press; 1996.

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