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The New Manager - Management

## Resistance, how to work with and around it

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*Any organisational change must address restoration of wholeness, of working with the total system and not with isolated parts*

*In an assignment to facilitate meaningful dialogue among senior members of a speciality hospital a Gestalt therapist revealed two levels of conversation that were apparently happening as he encouraged conversation:*

WHAT WAS BEING SAID	WHAT WAS NOT BEING SAID
Chief: "So what do you think about the idea?"	
CAO: "Sounds good to me!"	"What a bone headed plan."
Chief: "Can you spare two men for the job?"	
CAO: "Sure, whatever you need"	"Don't call on me, don't call on me!"
Chief: "We start tomorrow"	
CAO: "Sounds fine"	"I will call in sick tomorrow"

Current Gestalt (a German word meaning 'becoming whole') language describes resistance as 'creative adjustment,' a desire to grow out of the *status quo*. Resistance is a force that slows down movement. On a highway where speeding cars can kill speed breakers provide resistance. Thus resistance has hope embedded in it, it protects from harm.

If individuals and organisations thus primarily aim for wholeness why is there evidence of resistance and what does it mean?

The Gestalt sentiment tells us that human beings are essentially healthy and sickness happens because they get fragmented. Organisations likewise are basically healthy and robust but fracture when they become compartmentalised. Any intervention of organisation change must thus address restoration of wholeness, of working with the total system and not with isolated parts.

For a while, however, let us examine how resistance is manifest and how one copes.

### SPOTTING RESISTANCE

It is important to recognise signs of resistance otherwise one can turn into a victim. Resistance comes in many forms:

**Confusion:** Even after you have explained many times people keep asking you the basic questions, why? People are not asking simply because they want to. Resistance creates a fog that makes it difficult for people to comprehend.

**Immediate criticism:** Even before people hear all the details they express disapproval. When individuals criticise too quickly, it is likely they have been burned before and have developed a shell of resistance.

**Denial:** people put their heads in the sand and refuse to see things.

**Malicious intent:** people take strong actions to stop proceedings, machines malfunction and messages don't get delivered.

**Easy agreement:** people appear to go along, only later they drag their feet and one learns the truth.

**Deflections:** people keep changing the subject

**Silence:** stone faces give no hint of what they think

It is often noticed that resistance unattended makes matters worse. Some of the examples that have been witnessed in corporate life include:

**A merger** that never quite happened because little was done to understand the concerns and ideas of those whose lives were going to be changed.

**A new** product that died even before it was born because the advocates tried to force its development before the departments had agreed to its merits.

**A construction** project that went over budget because various groups could not find ways to overcome their differences.

**A quality** improvement process that was never implemented because no one sought the support of middle managers, who remained cynical about corporate leadership's commitment.

**A bank that** spends lakhs of rupees for strategic plans that are never implemented because no one except senior management and the consultants care about tomes of bound notes.

When resistance is experienced and not worked through the purveyor of the unendorsed business plan some times resorts to destructive methods to force ideas, resulting in even greater resistance:

**Use of power:** simply trying to overpower with force

**Manipulate:** conveniently applying pressure

**Apply force** of reason: trying to overcome with facts and figures

**Ignore resistance:** viewing it as a minor nuisance

**Play off relationships:** divide and achieve

**Make deals:** "I'll give you this if you give me that"

**Kill the messenger:** when the news is bad get rid of the person who questions

All these approaches assume that the architect of this strategy who desires his / her way is right and the others must be persuaded by force to go along. Based on competition, it happens that someone will win and someone will lose. Yet when people feel they have something to lose they fight back.

Interestingly, while organisations capture their structure on paper it actually exists only in people's mind and they respond to this image of organisation as they experience it impacting them.

Therefore, it is important for managers to recognise that there are several levels of transactions taking place in an organisation and if they can go below the surface and see what is not apparent they have a greater chance of restoring health.



When exploring resistance one must recognise the 'iceberg model' as being evident (See chart 1).

In an old economy manufacturing enterprise, where the average ages of current incumbents were 45 years, a newly-inducted Managing Director, member of the promoter's family decided to bring in sweeping changes. He sought to automate all procurement procedures and thus create redundancy and diminish the workforce.

The immediate reaction from senior members was that 'It costs too much.' The project was inordinately delayed and a hiding cauldron of boiling resentment was beginning to simmer. Slowing down and going deeper was imperative to understand the resistance.

A social scientist was commissioned to explore the situation and his analysis revealed the findings as described in Chart 2.

### SOLUTION

If the enterprise allows itself to be seduced by the 'it costs too much' argument it will search for less meaningful ways to develop the new system thinking and assume that it has dealt with the major obstacle, yet then wonder why resistance remains so high.

The consultant offered two fundamental questions to bat the situation. He asked the young Managing Director to ask of himself: "What is in it for me?" and "What is in it for them?"

Touchstones that helped restore harmony were then emphasised:

Embrace resistance; Respect those who resist; Join with the resistance.

To embrace resistance one must let one's guard down and enter the world of those who resist. Embracing resistance is counter-intuitive. It goes against natural instincts of protecting yourselves. But if you do not move towards resistance, it is likely that the boat you are travelling in will capsize. For those who run rapids in rafts, they know that when their craft is headed broad side towards a large rock the best is to lean downstream, toward the rock. Leaning into the rock exposes more of the bottom of the boat to the downstream current giving you time to manoeuvre. Leaning away from the rock tilts you upstream, allowing the current to catch the edge of the boat and flip it over.

You give up nothing by treating people with respect. Although there are no guarantees this is the only way you can ever hope to build trust. Respecting another allows you to listen with interest. You don't need to agree with others but you need to understand them. Respect is the behaviour not a belief. Respect is a way of acknowledging the others and allows you to listen deeply with an open heart and mind.

Building support for change comes from blending one's intention with those of the others. The secret is in finding ways to combine 'what is in it for me' with 'what is in it for them.' As you join with the resistance you start listening to common fears and common interests.

Finally, resistance exists as it is people's assertion of their identity. It is a part of the natural world. In managing resistance you manage change. When we view resistance as a wall to be destroyed we forget that there are people behind the wall and when we try to destroy it they fight back. Remember, people don't resist change, they only resist being changed.

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