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Managing resistance



MUMBAI: Bank employees protest at the Azad Maidan on a one day nationwide strike against banking sector reforms in Mumbai on August 5, 2011. Photo: PAUL NORONHA

Why organisations today are approaching resistance with compassion and patience.

Learning from the Maruti impasse, an article written by J.N. Amroliya in the *Business Line* edition of Tuesday, August 9, 2011, has inspired this response.

Resistance in organisations has always been seen as negative, something to overcome. Yet, to look at resistance as 'creative adjustment', the difficulty in adjusting to a new situation or environment and, therefore, requiring compassion and patience, is the trend in several enlightened organisations today, which are working towards collaboration, cooperation and trust.

To discount any aspect of human interaction, be it resistance or conflict, is to reduce and limit one's range of alternatives.

We often hear admonitions such as 'Don't be defensive' and 'You are thinking only of your own welfare' which we label as resistance. The first thing to recognise is that people will always resist, knowingly or otherwise, for they are afraid of change. Yet, it is in honouring this resistance and dealing with it respectfully that resistance becomes an asset and can develop rather than injure the relationship between the demander and the resistor.

Comments such as 'I don't want to,' or 'I would rather not', that are recognised as blocks, are really objections that are being made for what one does not understand and is uncomfortable with.

This is authentic resistance as the one who denies is genuinely concerned about altering his position and imagines in so doing will pay a personal price.

When somebody says, "I will do it later" he is stalling. This means he wants time to think and a wise response to this would be, "Is there anything of a serious nature that stops you from doing it now?"

Sometimes people side step. They say, "let him do it." An antidote to this would be, "I appreciate your predicament, yet would like to know if you have any objection."

Hank Karp, in talking about working with resistance, says resistance can be worked through in an enabling way if we:

Surface the resistance

Honour the resistance and

Explore the resistance

Surface the resistance: It is most difficult to get resistance out in the open. If there has been a past emphasis on breaking down resistance either by pushing, prodding or provoking, the resistor will see himself as highly vulnerable. Sometimes, the individual may not even be aware of what he is resisting.

It is important, therefore, to make it safe for an individual to speak his heart. Being straightforward and recognising that the resistor is testing us will help us listen to people as they talk. It is important to hear it all. Once the resistor is aware that he is not going to be counter-attacked or sold a solution, he will be more willing to allow himself to shift perspective. It is alright to probe resistance as long as it is done gently.

Honour the resistance: This is a time for listening. This is one of those times when people who state their resistance are actually giving you vital information of where some of the pitfalls may be and they are also telling you what is most important to

them: their likes, dislikes, concerns and wants. Any attempt to discount this only stops information from coming in. It tells the resistor that his opinion does not matter and, therefore, neither does he.

Acknowledging the resistance, therefore, is really part of listening. It only means to the resistor that he is being heard. Acknowledgement does not mean agreeing or disagreeing. In acknowledging the resistance, you are simply saying that you appreciate the other person's right to resist openly.

Explore the resistance: Once the resistor feels safe and is willing to discuss the resistance openly, it is time to explore the nature of resistance jointly.

When mutually exploring resistance, it is wise to ask, "What is your objection?" and "What do you prefer?" The first probes what is truly blocking the resistor and the second puts the resistor in a proactive stance. Holding back resistance requires energy and no one truly wants to be drained. When the resistor realises that he is not going to be coerced, he is able to free himself from the depleting forces of resistance and interacts freely.

The need to resist is a powerful part of human nature. It is neither good nor bad, but an attribute that can be used to strengthen relationships and responses between individuals.

The above approach to deal with resistance can be effectively used in any situation where there is conflict and lack of alignment.

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