

The following material has recently been used to great success with management and leadership teams. If you'd like to learn more, please review our Programs and contact us at www.leadershiptransformationgroup.com



Handling Resistance: The Power of Acknowledgement

Constructive feedback is a normal part of:

- (1) Maintaining and setting standards for people on the job who are unclear about those standards or are not meeting the standards at a level you want.
- (2) Facilitating change when people on your team may feel not ready for it.

For example, there may be members on your team who are behind on their service plan reviews or other kinds of compliance-based material, or others who may be under pressure to visit families in the field. In each case, you need to speak with them because time is running short. Maybe others are not up-to-date on filing paperwork, but the staff seems demoralized and burned-out from being pushed too harshly. In both cases, it is your job as a manager and leader, to give feedback that confronts a person's fears or to give feedback that stings, even when they know it to be true. Often the reactions to such feedback breed "resistance."

As a leader, it is important to remember that resistance is an emotional response to material that people feel ill-equipped or unready to deal with. It is a part of the normal process of adaptation when people are required to do things that they feel unable to handle or that show they did not utilize their skills fully.

This resistance leads to "flight" (avoidance) or "fight" (conflict) behaviors. Flight causes people to grow passive, ignore your requests, or deny that there is a problem. "Fight" causes people to be angry with you, overly demanding, and actively upset.

Feelings and behaviors such as these cannot be ignored if you wish to break down resistance. People often feel trapped about what to do. With flight, we can't get people to admit that there is even a problem. With fight, we must confront anger that can make us emotional. We don't want to ignore what is going on and thus seemingly admit that their behavior is okay!

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We all have learned that no one can take away what a person feels. To acknowledge the power of feelings is not to accept the behavior that those feelings generate or that you have constructively given feedback on. We therefore want you to practice a sophisticated paradox.

Start by acknowledging the power of emotions rather than confronting the difficult behavior head-on. Doing that is a critical step in breaking down resistance.

It is through the use of the Power of Acknowledgement that you can get various members of your staff prepared to change, to meet standards that they may not have been meeting, or to begin ending their demoralization.

The Steps of Power of Acknowledgment

If the person is in a fight mode (arguing, yelling, visibly upset, etc.):

1. If you have stated a directive or point of change and then you witness anger/fight, openly allow the resistance to occur for a few seconds. *Remember that in doing this, you are not taking the emotions as a personal attack on you.*
2. Let the staff member know that the frustrations are real. Discuss how they feel and that this feeling can build up in a time when the larger environment is unsettled, or discuss how new challenges seem overwhelming.
3. Use any sign of positive response—body language, eye contact, or, if in a larger group, repetition of the same issue, etc.—as a signal to move ahead. Openly note the response and tell them that you appreciate the effort they are making with you.
4. All of this can take anywhere from five seconds to a minute, no more. Now move to the present issue and restate it. Ask them if there is a way to make the problem or issue easier to frame or to manage.

Handling Resistance: The Power of Acknowledgement



5. If you still meet resistance, work with it as you remind them of what they will have to do—what is the present and is required, and that they are in a discussion with you, not a fight.
6. Be firm but supportive here. The Power of Acknowledgment is not the same as ignoring what needs to be done and/or changed.
7. Because of the higher level of anxiety created by the topic or issue, put the expectations in writing so that continue miscommunication does not occur. Remember: If it is not in writing, this interaction and its resolution did not really happen.
8. Use judgment about whether or not you will repeat this exercise with the same person on the same issue. You undermine your authority and the expectation of their new and/or increased responsibility every time you have to repeat yourself, especially if point #7 has not been followed.

The Steps of Power of Acknowledgment

If the person responds with flight behavior (passivity, “yes-ing” you to death, denying there is a problem, etc.):

Points 1 and 2 are the same as if the person is in fight mode.

- 3a. If the person responds well at point 3 by relaxing a bit, proceed as with the other points to the Power of Acknowledgment under the Fight section.
- 3b. If the person continues to deny that there is a problem and accepts nothing through passive resistance, you can use what we call the “Two Truths”. The *first* truth is that perhaps they are correct, they are in complete agreement with you, there is nothing wrong, and they will proceed quickly to change what needs to be done. It is, after all, their truth (and who knows? Perhaps it is!)

AND (not BUT), the second truth, is that particular behaviors need to change, actions need to be done, etc. If the first truth operates, fine, then that makes the second truth

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redundant. The second truth holds, however, no matter what—and as supervisor you need those things to be done, changes to be made, etc.

Proceed to Steps 5–8 above. Given the passivity and lack of acknowledgment by your fellow team member, make sure Step 7 is followed. Remember that if constructive feedback is not in writing, nothing happened!