

Leading Reluctant People

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For most of us, the idea of being open to resistance is akin to welcoming a head cold. But it is one of life's paradoxes that the times when we are most eager to push our own causes are the very times we must be the most receptive to counterarguments from people who are reluctant to see our point of view.

To grasp the paradox, consider Newton's Third Law: every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Pushing back is a law of nature. In the martial arts, this wisdom guides the expert's strategy of using an opponent's own force to topple him. As another analogy, consider what it takes to hold onto a handful of sand: the tighter your grasp, the faster the sand slips away.

Resistance is always part of the picture in situations where we want to

influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others—which is what leadership is all about. When people already agree with you, persuasion is unnecessary. Managers who get results induce reluctant people to buy in. For example, we found that supervisors in an oil refinery who persuaded their employees to be safety conscious were much more effective than those supervisors who ordered people to heed safety procedures.

In virtually any situation involving conflict, or any encounter in which we hope to persuade another, success depends on how adroitly we handle resistance. For leaders, such situations may involve

influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others—which is what leadership is all about. When people already agree with you, persuasion is unnecessary. Managers who get results induce reluctant people to buy in. For example, we found that supervisors in an oil refinery who persuaded their employees to be safety conscious were much more effective than those supervisors who ordered people to heed safety procedures.

- Motivating direct reports to improve their performance
- Swaying team decisions



- Making a business proposal
- Leading a change process
- Closing a sale to an important customer

This article describes the people-smart strategies that leaders can use to communicate effectively and persuasively with those they wish to motivate and influence on the job, whether boss, peer, or subordinate.

Are You Talking with or at Them?

When people don't think or do willingly what we want them to, we need to drop our own agenda for a while to learn about the other person's needs, concerns, and objections. That's the crux of being open to resistance. By uncovering what matters to others, we gain the know-how to present our ideas in terms that may hold particular appeal to them. And, in this sense, resistance provides a real opportunity. When people are willing to come out and tell us their concerns or objections, they are giving us material to work with. In contrast, silent acquiescence provides only a false sense of security.

Try this exercise in selling: make your best effort to convince someone to try a particular product or service you really like, but do so *without asking the other person any*

questions. Even if you are enthusiastic and compelling in your presentation, you will probably achieve only partial success. And yet this is exactly what most of us tend to do. We let our enthusiasm carry us along, only to discover that we've left our buyer behind.

There are many reasons why communication so often becomes a one-way street:

We assume too much. Our own mental picture of what we know, think, or believe is so clear to us that we forget that others may not be starting from the same page. It's easy to leave out important information that others need in order to fully grasp what we're saying and follow our flow.

We sell the listener short. Conversely, we may assume others are clueless and fail to build on what they already know. When we do this, we run the risk of sounding patronizing and provoking people to tune us out.

We're in a rush. When time is tight, it's tempting to cram in information, galloping way ahead of the listener, who has long since given up following.

We cloud the picture. We give too many details up front and fail to convey the big picture. When a

journalist is criticized for "burying the lead," it means that the main point of the story didn't make it into the opening sentences. Many people do this in their daily communication, missing opportunities to include and inform their listeners.

Communication must be a two-way street—especially when your goal is to persuade. When you include the listeners in the conversation, you find out what they understand and think. You then can build on what's accurate or correct what is inaccurate. If you do all the talking, how-

ever, you have to guess how each listener interprets or reacts to what you are saying.

Four Coaching Tips for Including the Listener

People-smart communicators know that no matter how complex the topic, how great the time pressure, or what the mental state of the listener, they need to treat listeners as communication partners. Here are some of the techniques they use:

Orient

Convey the big picture before launching into details. Bear in mind that the nature of the big picture depends on the situation and may appeal to the listener's emotions in addition to highlighting key facts. For example, if you were about to share some very painful information, the big picture might be: "*I'm afraid I have some bad news.*" If the topic is complicated and boring, the big picture might take the form of a brief headline: "*The new marketing plan,*

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although complex, is a daring new approach." Here are three strategies for orienting the listener:

- *Ask a question*—begin by inquiring what the listener already knows, thinks, or feels about the topic. This engages the listener right from the start and gives you clues about what additional information is important to supply.
- *Preview coming attractions*—give a quick overview of what you plan to tell the listener. Think of the way a news anchor introduces

the headlines before launching into the actual stories. If you are sharing complex information, a great strategy is to break it down into three to five key points. Then you can tell the receiver up front: "Our new marketing plan has three key components."

- *Start with the bottom line*—get the receivers' attention up front by stating how they will benefit from listening to what you're about to say: "I'm going to describe a marketing plan that could double sales in your division."

Feed Information in Portions

Instead of trying to share everything at once, offer information in manageable chunks that the listeners can process and respond to. When we flood people with information, they'll rarely remember what we just said. A speaker talks on the average of 150 words per minute. That's a lot to think about. What happens after a minute or more of nonstop talk? The listener gives up concentrating on what you're saying and starts thinking about other things. No wonder people's minds wander in the face of an overly talkative person.

When possible, organize complex information ahead of time, whittling it down to three to five main points. Slow down your delivery to give the listeners time to digest what they are hearing.

Use Familiar References

Make sure you and the person you want to influence are speaking the same language. For example, would your listener be more familiar with "horizontal or vertical" or "land-

scape or portrait" in describing page orientation? Avoid technical terms or jargon that may be foreign to your listeners. Incorporate metaphors that match their experience and interests (if you're talking about teamwork with sports buffs, football analogies are great; if the listeners are more the artistic type, you might do better to evoke images of a dance ensemble). Don't hesitate to ask whether a word or phrase is unfamiliar. Many people are reluctant to express ignorance and will act as if they understand when they don't.

Share the Microphone

When you communicate, be more of a talk show host than a lecturer. Find ways to bring your listeners into the discussion in order to involve them and ensure understanding. Here are three ways to do this:

- *Respond to nonverbal cues:* If someone looks confused, stop and explore what's causing the

puzzlement, rather than going on and on in an effort to make your point. If the other person seems to be reacting with any strong emotion, positive or negative, reflect this: "You seem surprised." "You look excited."

Treat listeners as communication partners.

- *Actively check in with your partner in conversation:* Pause and see if the other person has questions or reactions you can build on to make your point. Use phrases like these:

So far, so good?

Before we go further, do you have any questions?

How am I doing?

Have I been clear? Helpful?

What are you thinking at this point?

- *Invite feedback:* Ask the other party to restate what you've said. You can do this without being patronizing. Say: "Would you mind giving me a quick recap of what I've told you so I can see if I've been clear?" Or: "So what would you say to someone unfamiliar with this topic if you had to explain it?"

Get a Foot in the Door Instead of a Door in the Face

When you are dealing with a very reluctant person or group, it helps

to get a foot in the door, if you can. Instead of pushing for a big yes, request a small one by trying one or more of these strategies:

- Ask your audience to merely listen to your suggestion without expecting a response.
- Invite them to read something relevant to your recommendation.
- Encourage them to try out your suggestion as a one-time experiment.
- Urge them to consider only one part of your recommendation rather than the whole enchilada.

All these foot-in-the-door approaches represent ways to keep your cause alive while respecting other people's resistance.

You may never learn to enjoy getting resistance from people on the job. But if you think about it, the odds that people will uncritically accept your ideas all the time are very slim. Increase your tolerance for others' resistance and learn how to use their objections to enhance your appeals and you can begin to turn the odds in your favor.

Patience is a critical quality in persuasion. Faced with resistance, many people become anxious or impatient. Their instincts are either to push harder or give up. Being open to resistance often requires

bidding your time and being prepared to renew your efforts at a later date when circumstances may make the other person more ready to consider your ideas.

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This article is adapted from the authors' new book "Working PeopleSmart: 6 Strategies for Success."

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