

Reducing Resistance to Change and Conflict: A Key to Successful Leadership

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Article One: Models of Resistance to Change

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You can't steal second base with your foot on first

Kenneth Rose (Rose, 2003), in his article reviewing John Bennett's models of leadership (Bennett 2001), mentioned two philosophers who spoke about change.

'In 513 B.C., Heraclitus of Greece observed, "There is nothing permanent except change." And in the 16th century, Niccolo Machiavelli stated in his political treatise, *The Prince*, "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.'"

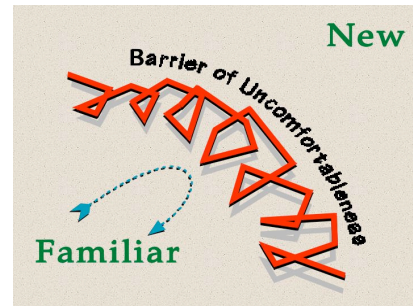
Change is inevitable, but it can also be uncomfortable. Because it is uncomfortable, most people tend to resist change. **One of the most important responsibilities of an effective leader is to reduce people's resistance to change in order to promote growth in the organization.**

According to John P. Kotter, retired Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership at Harvard Business School in Boston, most organizations do a poor job of implementing large-scale change because of resistance within the organization (Fandray 2003). In a study of 288 companies who shared lessons and best practices in change management (Creasey 2003), Tim Creasey found that the top obstacle to change was employee resistance at all levels. In this report, "participants indicated that there is a natural human resistance to change that impacted project success."

According to William Bridges and Susan Mitchell (Bridges & Mitchell, 2000), change is difficult because of the uncomfortable, internal process of transition through which people must move. Bridges and Mitchell point out that "change is external (the different policy, practice, or structure that the leader is trying to bring about) while transition is internal (a psychological reorientation that people have to go through before the change can work). Transition takes longer because it requires that people undergo three separate processes, and all of them are upsetting." Three stages are defined: 1) Saying Goodbye, 2) The Neutral Zone, and 3) Moving Forward.

People resist the first stage of *Saying Goodbye* to the old because they are more comfortable with their old habits – with what they know, even if it doesn't work. As people move away from what is familiar toward what is new, they start to feel uncomfortable, so they tend to slip right back into the same old ineffective way of doing things. This can be true even when they view the new goal as being a desired outcome.

The new, by definition, is unknown. It is the fear of the unknown, the discomfort with what is not familiar that characterizes Bridges & Mitchell's second phase, the *Neutral Zone*, the "in-between state (that) is so full of uncertainty and confusion that simply coping with it takes most of people's energy." The *Neutral Zone* is uncomfortable, so people are driven to get out of it. Unfortunately, instead of moving through the discomfort into new improvements, they cling to the old, ineffective, familiar ways. In an organization that has punished mistakes, people will hesitate to embrace the new ways during the third phase of *Moving Forward*, until they know it is safe. So even when people know they want to get to second base, they have a false sense of security on first base. They resist the risks associated with changes and transitions.



Resistance to change is a natural defense mechanism. We should be wary when we are stepping into unfamiliar territory. Unfortunately, it is commonly known that for some people the best defense is a good offense. Aggressive and defensive behaviors are often turned against the other members of our own tribe, so we fight with each other about who should be in charge of the hunting party while the predators surround us and get ready for a hostile takeover.

Laws of physics state that it takes a certain amount of energy to overcome inertia, and that resistance (friction) is a force that will slow down a moving object. In his series of [online tutorials](#), Tom Henderson explains basic principles of physics that were first proposed by Galileo and Newton. "All objects resist changes in their state of motion . . . they have inertia. But do some objects have more of a tendency to resist changes than others? Absolutely yes!" (Henderson 1996-2001). Henderson goes on to explain that this tendency is solely dependant upon mass – the more mass, the more inertia, and the more resistance to change in motion. But it is possible to create leverage to overcome inertia, and to use lubrication to reduce friction (resistance).

Inertia and resistance are found in the laws of physics, but also in relation to change in people and organizations. One could say that all people tend to resist change, but some people tend to resist more than others! The "psychological mass" which provides resistance would be the rigid beliefs and habits that weigh down a person's mind. While it is not possible to completely remove the

discomfort associated with the stages of change, it is possible to overcome people's inertia to saying goodbye to the old habits, and to reduce people's resistance to change. The goal is not zero resistance – that is not possible. The goal is to move through the resistance more quickly. This series of articles proposes a number of models and techniques that can be used by leaders to reduce people's resistance to change, and to resolve more quickly the conflicts that are associated with change.

The Concerns Based Adoption Model

The **Concerns Based Adoption Model** (CBAM) is a conceptual model developed by Educational Psychologist Dr. Frances Fuller (Hall et al, 1973). The CBAM hypothesizes a predictable hierarchy of concerns that individuals experience when adopting any new innovation. Whether this change is a student learning to be a teacher (the original application of the CBAM), or an employee learning computer software, the privatization of a former government agency, or the inevitable doing more with less, the stages involved in adopting any innovation are the same.

There are three basic Stages of Concern defined in the CBAM: (1) Concern for Self, (2) Concern for Task, and (3) Concern for Impact. Most organizations only address the concerns for task, if any are addressed at all. CBAM suggests that the successful accomplishment of an intervention is directly dependent on moving employees through each of these levels of concern.

- Concern for Self. Everyone worries. Whenever change occurs we worry how the change will affect us. Am I up to the challenge? Can I learn what I need in order to succeed in the new system? How will it affect my job, my future, and me? Will I be able to do what is required? (Even Konosuke Matsushita said, "It's alright to worry. . . . What is important is our response. . ." (Source: <http://mif-iuj.org/kanosuke.html>)
- Concern for Task. What am I required to do? What are the steps necessary to succeed? What follows what? What do I have to do and how do I do it? Who else is involved in me successfully accomplishing my task?
- Concern for Impact. What difference will this change really make? How will it affect how decisions are made? What will I be able to do that I can't do now? Why will it be better? How will I be able to serve others better?

No Gripe Sessions

One note of caution is to avoid letting this process of understanding concerns turn into a series of gripe sessions. Gripe sessions are rarely productive because they do not get people focused on positive solutions. The *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI) approach (Whitney & Schau, 1998), developed by Dr. David Cooperrider and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University and The Taos Institute, proposes that organizations change in the direction of what they study. Inquiry plants the seeds of the future. AI recommends that leaders focus on what has worked *successfully* in the past and how this applies to the future.

This may seem to be in contrast to the CBAM's recommendation of focusing on concerns for change. If you encourage people to only talk about their concerns your organization could turn into an ongoing therapy session that may be good for personal growth but doesn't get the job done.

The CBAM is not simply a touchy-feely approach to making people feel better about what they may not like. To lead people through a period of change it is not sufficient to simply state the positive changes you want to make and give directives. The CBAM hypothesizes that when people are faced with a change they must go through three stages of Concern for Self (become aware, gather information, consider personal implications) before being prepared to deal with the Task Concerns (learning of routine, new tasks), which then prepares them to contribute to the Impact (improve benefits, collaborate with colleagues, re-evaluate quality and seek major modifications or alternatives). If the Self or Task Concerns are not addressed, employees will be distracted, and therefore not adequately prepared to contribute to the Impact.

According to the CBAM, a leader must address the concerns of employees and managers about the change. But the trick is in *how* to address concerns without letting people focus on the negative aspects, and thereby to continue whining and complaining. This is accomplished by helping them experience feeling understood about their concerns, while also keeping them focused on a positive vision for growth. Bridges and Mitchell encourage leaders to focus on communicating the "*Four P's of Transition*" that emphasize connections with and concern for people (Mitchell 2003):

1. The *purpose*: Why we have to do this.
2. The *picture*: What it will look and feel like when we reach our goal.
3. The *plan*: Step-by-step, how we will get there.
4. The *part*: What you can (and need to) do to help us move forward.

People are usually motivated first to fulfill their own individual needs. Leaders must also motivate people to work together collaboratively to resolve the problems of the organization or institution. To do this CBAM should be used to

link people's concerns to each of Bridges and Madison's "Four P's of Transition." The following points outline the psychology behind motivating individuals with CBAM and the Four P's of Transition.

- I am motivated to fulfill my needs.
- My needs must be met, in order to motivate me to effectively put policy or changes into place.
- My concerns arise when my needs may not be met (*concerns for self, task, impact*).
- If you don't understand my needs, how can your changes, policies, and solutions (the *Plan* and the *Part*) be relevant to me?
- If I know that you understand my concerns, and you can link them to your solutions, I'll have less need to defend my needs.
- Therefore I will be less resistant and more motivated to implementing your solutions (the *Plan* and the *Part*) even if I disagree with the solution.

The aim is to reduce resistance, although one will not necessarily remove the resistance completely. Together with Bridges and Mitchell's "Four P's of Transition", CBAM focuses management's attention on specific areas of concern when making a change or giving a directive. The CBAM model suggests that while developing the *Four P's*, a leader should inquire about the concerns of those employees who will be touched by the change. If employees perceive that the *Purpose, Picture, Plan, and the Parts* incorporate a response to their concerns, then their resistance will be reduced.

Bridges & Mitchell's approach emphasizes "connections with and concern for people." In an interview for the Leader to Leader website, John Kotter speaks to the same motivational key (Kotter, 2003), "People change their behavior when they are motivated to do so, and that happens when you speak to their feelings. **You don't have to spend a million dollars and six months to prepare for a change effort. You do have to make sure that you touch people emotionally.**" When people feel that you understand their concerns you touch them emotionally and help them feel more secure. When they know their *Part* in a *Plan* that can bring the whole organization to the *Picture* that resolves their concerns, they will be emotionally inspired to reach beyond their individual concerns and contribute to the good of the whole.

In the same article (Kotter, 2003), Kotter's statement of how to motivate employees to embrace changes reflects the basic principles of CBAM.

"Employees need to understand that the changes are not oddball ideas being pushed by the bosses. They need to see short-term wins that demonstrate the validity of the change vision (*concerns*

about impact). If the win is not ambiguous, is visible (*concerns about task*), and is of value to people (*concerns about self*), then people will say, "yes, I get it" and be more likely to help make change happen."

There Are Many Leaders

There is another reason why it is important to address the concerns of people at all levels of the organization. Kotter also states, "Leaders exist at all levels of an organization. At the edges of the enterprise, of course, leaders are accountable for less territory. Their vision may sound more basic; the number of people to motivate may be two. *But they perform the same leadership role as their more senior counterparts*. They excel at seeing things through fresh eyes and at challenging the status quo. They are energetic and seem able to run through, or around, obstacles." (Kotter, 1998)

These people may bring unique perspectives and solutions to the change process. Or their ideas may be just what management wanted. But when they are allowed to contribute, they will see the relevance of the change to their own needs. And if these potential leaders are not given the opportunity to invest their energy in contributing, they may invest their energy in leading a resistance movement simply because they feel that their concerns are not understood.

Not merely asking permission

In the Prosci Benchmarking Report on change management, Creasey and Hiatt point out that the leadership should make it clear that this process of involving everyone is not one of seeking permission to make the change. One of the key messages to communicate is "the expectation that change will happen and is not a choice." (Creasey 2003.) Their Best Practices in Change Management presents clear, common sense suggestions that reflect the guidelines of CBAM, The Three Stages of Transition, and The Four P's of Transition. (A complete copy of the report can be obtained at www.prosci.com).

Communications

Two recommendations from Creasey and Hiatt reflect the power of a leader's personal impact in communicating about change: (1) "... face-to-face communications were the most effective, including group and team meetings, presentations and demonstrations, one-on-one discussions"; and (2) "Communications should be open and risk free where employees can ask

questions.” This shows sensitivity to CBAM’s emphasis on responding to concerns. However, creating an “open and risk free” environment is not as simple as scheduling a question and answer session. Consider the following case study.

A government agency had provided overtime work to employees for fifty years. In 1998 this policy was changed in order to cut costs. But the employees had come to depend on this overtime pay, not as a bonus, but as a requirement to support their basic lifestyles. This change in income produced a fundamental Self Concern for the employees.

The Manager presented this announcement to the front line supervisors in a weekly meeting, and asked if anyone had any questions. After waiting five seconds for a response, while the supervisors sat in stunned silence, the Manager said, “O.K.,” and began to proceed to the next topic on the agenda. A consultant was present at the meeting in order to give feedback. He interrupted and asked the Manager if he thought that the absence of questions meant that no one had any questions or concerns. The Manager said, “I don’t know if no one says anything.” So the consultant said, “Let’s find out.”

He facilitated a process in which each person wrote down a list of concerns that his employees would have when the supervisor made the announcement. Then teams were formed to combine these individual lists into team lists. Each team shared its list with the whole group. In this way the small group discussion provided opportunity for a more free flow of information, and each individual could have his or her concerns represented by the team without having to stand out. The Manager reflected back to the supervisors the concerns they were expressing (concerns of employees and of supervisors), and all were written down for further study. Further steps were taken at a later time to explore what support could be generated to help people with these concerns.

The supervisors said it was one of the best staff meetings they ever had. This was true even though the difficult change was still going to happen. They understood the Purpose and the Picture of the change. What happened in this meeting that had never happened before was they felt that their concerns were understood by management, and would be factored into the Plan of action.

The final article in this series proposes a number of group processes for facilitating such interaction beyond simple question and answer sessions. Although the processes are simple, the facilitation can be complex and is best performed by a professional who has been certified in these processes.

How to Communicate The Four P's

Other communication recommendations from Creasey and Hiatt emphasized the difference between the Purpose, Picture, and Plan aspects of the change message, and the Part that each employee should play. Based on the feedback from their study, they concluded that the CEO or President is the best person to communicate messages that influence control over the direction of the business (Purpose, Picture, Plan), while the Direct Supervisor is most appropriate for messages that influence control over the direction of daily activities (Part).

Important messages to communicate

The most important messages to communicate to impacted employees fall into two categories.

1. Messages about things: (from the CEO or President)
 - Current situation and rationale for the change (*Purpose*).
 - Vision of organization after change takes place (*Picture*).
 - The basics of what is changing, how it **will** change, and when it will change (*Plan*).
 - The expectation that change will happen and is not a choice.
 - Status updates on the implementations of the change, including success stories.
2. Messages about how the change impacted the employee: (from the Supervisor) (*Part*).
 - Impact of change on the day-to-day activities (WIIFM).
 - Implications of change on job security (will I have a job?).
 - Specific behaviors and activities expected from the employee, including support of the change.
 - Procedures for getting help and assistance during the change.

Upcoming Series

These models (*The Barrier of Uncomfortableness*, *CBAM*, *The Three Stages of Transition*, and *The Four P's of Transition*) can be helpful in understanding the nature of change in an organization, and the effect it has on people's behavior and productivity. In addition to this awareness of change, processes are needed to guide group and individual interactions in such a way that as many as possible will feel safe to express disagreements, and confident that their concerns will at least be factored into the decision.

The following articles in this series will present various decision-making models and communication techniques for improving one-to-one communication and for facilitating respectful behavior in groups. Also presented will be a unique perspective on the relationship between *respect* and *understanding*, and how these relate to basic principles of gaining leverage in the martial arts and in communication.

The ultimate objective of using these techniques is to establish a work environment in which everyone feels safe to disagree so that communication is more open and work is more productive.

Reducing Resistance to Change and Conflict: A Key to Successful Leadership

Article Two: Herding Cats – The Process of Organizational Decision Making

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This is the second in a series of articles that examines the essential role of a leader in reducing resistance to change, in order to promote growth in an organization. The first article explored basic models of change that show why resistance occurs (CBAM – the Concerns Based Adoption Model by Frances Fuller (Hall, et. al. 1972) and The Stages of Transition and the Four P's of Transition by William Bridges and Susan Mitchell (Bridges & Mitchell 2000).

In addition to these broad models of change, decision making models are also needed that let people feel confident that their concerns will at least be factored into decisions, and know how it is appropriate and expected for them to express their disagreements with those in authority. This article presents the *Consensus Style* Decision Making Flowchart, not as a recommendation that all decisions should be made by consensus, but as a general process for reducing resistance in unanimous, consensus, majority, or authority decisions. Also presented is the Decision Making Grid, as a model for clarifying what role each person has in the decision making process, so that each person knows his or her Part in the Plan that will take the organization to it's goal (Picture) (Bridges 2003).

Herding Cats

The process of making organizational decisions can sometimes feel like herding cats. Leaders know they need to get everyone moving toward the same vision and mission (Purpose and Picture [Bridges & Mitchell 2000]), but no matter how hard leaders try, some people end up going in different directions, while some just sit there doing nothing. While you don't want blind obedience, you also don't want anarchy and chaos. Leaders need to learn how to stimulate individual initiative, while maintaining a proper respect for the authority structure of the organization. This balancing act can be accomplished with a combination of carefully applied decision-making models, and ethical, respectful behavior on the part of the leaders.

Decision Making Models

How decisions are made

In 1969, E.H. Schein outlined a classification of methods of decision making in teams. He proposed the amount of public and private agreement with the decision that is likely to be associated with each classification. The same principles apply to teams of varying sizes.

“Plop” - Any single member can decide to attempt to influence others without support from others. He lays a “plop,” for both publicly and privately, all are aware of the failure to accept his decision. Sharing of ideas and feelings has been at a minimum.

Self-Authorization - A member fails to sense or is indifferent to the matter of support from others and authorizes himself to decide for the team. Only the member has accepted the decision. He ceases his self-authorization only when he becomes aware that the rest of the team has not accepted his decision.

Decision by Authority - An individual with formal authority takes it on himself to make the decision with little or no involvement of the other members of the team. This often results in team members not being aware of the decision and resenting it. Due to lack of member input these decisions can quite easily be made on an inadequate information base.

Hand-Clasping - A single member is able to gain a hand-clasping support from one other member. This may be perceived as general support for a decision by the whole team, but this is often a misconception. A team cannot build and grow if such decisions are made frequently.

Minority Decision - More overt conflict and pressure become apparent when a minority decides for the team. The difference between public and private acceptance becomes greater. The minority publicly accepts the decision. Some of the majority go along publicly but not privately. Although there may be a fair amount of sharing of resources and needs among the minority, the majority remains non-participating and, generally uncommitted. Apathy usually appears when the decision is to be carried out.

Majority Decision - There is more use of resources and more commitment when a majority decides. Many or all of the minority may go along publicly, but their satisfaction and private agreement with the decision are low.

Consensus - Consensus has been found to yield maximum commitment from all in the team. Issues are thrashed out until all feelings have been seriously considered before a decision is reached. Yet such consensus may be false if it is gained by announcing that “silence means consent” and when members refuse to reveal their true opinions about matters. Similarly, when members are forced to reveal their true opinions about matters, true consensus still has not been achieved. Only when everyone in the team freely offers his opinions and a decision is hammered out based on the public examination of all ideas is true consensus likely to be attained. (Schein 1969)

Consensus is a slower and more painful method than other decision making methods that have been described. Consequently, it is usually less efficient than those other methods in situations where they will suffice. The question then becomes – when do you make the effort to seek consensus? Consensus is the

only safe method for a decision where non-support or sabotage by a member or a minority would ruin the undertaking.

While not all decisions can or should be made by consensus, processes can be established to allow for maximum input for all participants. When this is done there will be less resistance when it is time to implement a decision. The following points outline the psychology behind a consensus approach as a process that reduces resistance to decisions.

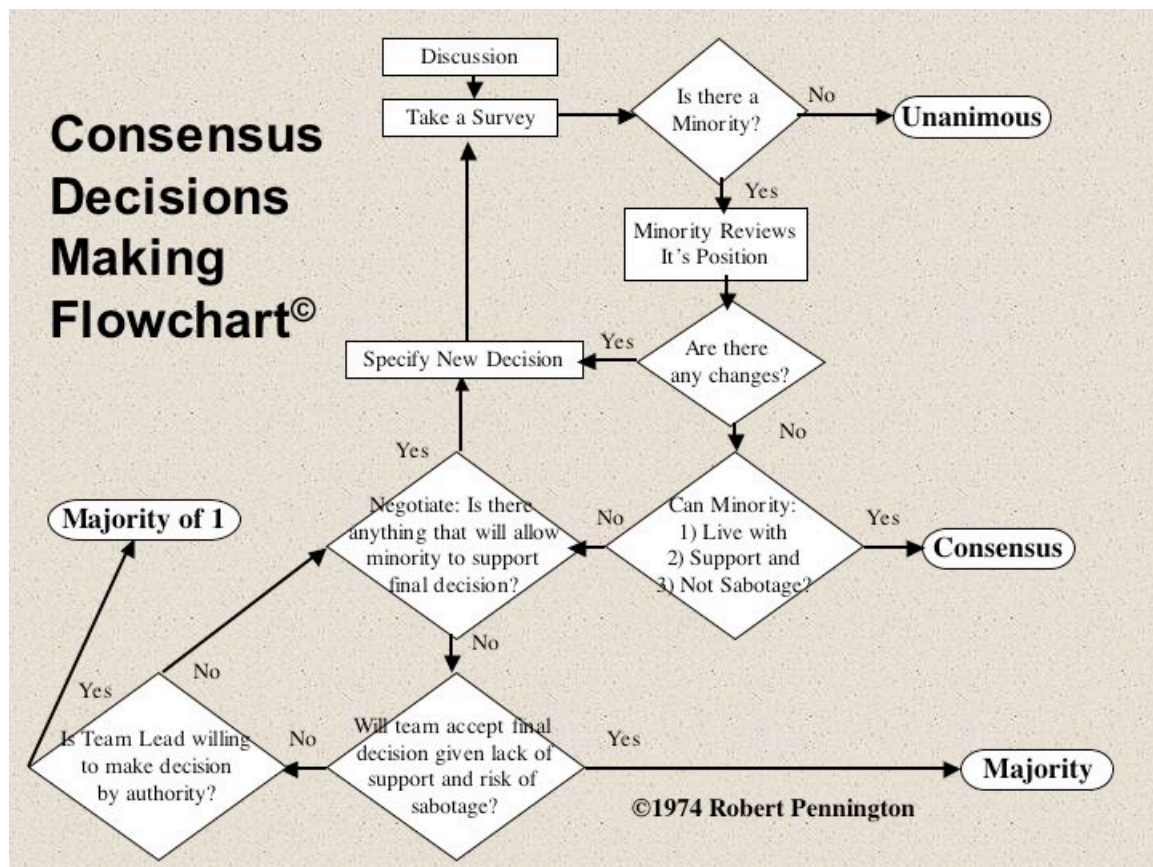
- If you take time, effort, and sincere interest to understand my concerns and link them to your solutions, I'll have less need to defend my position.
- If I don't have to defend my position, I will be less aggressive toward you and your ideas.
- If I am less defensive or aggressive, I will be less resistant to seeking alternatives.
- If we actively seek alternatives, we will be more likely to find a solution we can all support.
- John Kotter's studies (Kotter, 1995) suggest that about 75 percent of the work force must accept the urgency (of a change) if the overall effort is to succeed. While this does not require "unanimous agreement," it is the definition of consensus – a change we can live with and support.

The Challenges and Benefits of Consensus

The Consensus Style Decision Making Flowchart provides a process for such group interaction, showing the difference between four types of agreements: Unanimous, Consensus, Majority, Authority (Pennington, 1974). In a Unanimous Decision, all parties agree completely with all aspects of the decision. In a Consensus Decision, some members may have reservations about some aspects of the decision, but they openly agree to support the decision, and not to provide resistance that might sabotage its success. In a Majority Decision, the Majority is willing to accept the risk that resistance from a Minority, which disagrees with the decision, may cause problems. The Majority would then factor into the implementation of the decision contingency plans to handle the possible negative consequences of this resistance. To a certain extent, an Authority Decision is a "majority of one," in which one Authority imposes a decision on others who may resist. Each successive category of decision faces an increasing risk of active or passive resistance that could inhibit successful implementation. This is the risk for which the leader or authority is primarily responsible.

The Flowchart emphasizes that a key element in reaching consensus (and thereby reducing resistance) is for the "majority" (or the authority) to focus on making the "minority" feel understood about its position. This minority might be a smaller number of people or a group with less authority in the organization.

When this is done, the minority might have important information or insights that can be incorporated into the discussion, thereby improving the overall quality of the decision and the support for it.



Key elements of a consensus decision include:

- Most of the participants agree to the proposal.
- Each person dissenting is asked to speak to his or her dissent.
- A sincere attempt is made to reconcile the dissent by the majority. Key elements are active listening and serious consideration of the dissent.
- Proposal carries only after all dissent has been clearly understood, which is defined by the dissenting members. This allows for the wisdom of the experience of the dissent to inform and modify the decision for the benefit of all.

However, too often the majority pressures the minority to “cave in” and go along with the group. When the majority is a larger group, the minority feels the peer pressure of wanting to fit into the group and not be the cause of conflict. With a “majority of one,” the authority figure may pressure the group to conform through fear of retaliation. Or the authority figure may have a history of listening outwardly to the group, and then doing whatever he or she wants to do.

When the “majority” does not take the care to understand the position of the minority, it makes an unconscious assumption – *Since we are the majority we must be right. Therefore we do not need to listen to the other position, we need to change their minds.* Consequently, the minority withholds valuable information or insights that may have helped define a more successful decision. The minority is then blamed for a lack of cooperation and support, which puts the minority in a no-win position. If they continue to put forward their viewpoint, they are told they are resisting and must change. If they stop “resisting” they are told they are withholding, and are the cause of any failure. They come to believe they are blamed for the failures, while the leaders are credited with any success. This can cause in a deep-rooted apathy in an organization, which can sabotage any leaders efforts.

What Is My Part in the Decision?

The Consensus Style Decision Making Flowchart allows for Unanimous Decisions, facilitates Consensus Decisions, and shows how to reach Majority or Authority Decisions (Authority = a majority of one) with a minimum of resistance. But not all decisions can be made by consensus, nor would anyone want that to be true. This flowchart should be used as a process, not necessarily as a specific model for producing a consensus decision, except in circumstances where consensus is an absolute requirement.

Therefore **a model is needed to clarify what level of involvement each person has in the decision making process** (Bridges & Mitchell’s “what’s my *Part*”), in relation to any issue. The Decision Making Grid is a model that can be used to clarify each person’s role in any decision making process.

It has already been stated that when people know what *Part* they play in a *Plan* that adequately addresses their concerns, they will contribute more to the good of the whole, and not spend so much time fighting with co-workers and management to protect their own needs.

The common-sense logic behind using the Decision Making Grid

- People will use their power to support their needs. According to Sandra Ramey (in her study of university faculty governance), “Some facets of power identified are ‘personal power’, which is earned by experience and respect as a faculty member; and ‘position power’, which is implied’ by the authority given to that person’s title.” (Ramey, S.).
- If I don’t have control (*position power*), I must at least know that my needs and concerns are understood (*personal power*) (CBAM).

- If I am uncertain whether my needs and concerns will be addressed, I may use my '*personal power*' to reach beyond my position's sphere of influence. This leads to gossip, cliques, and political power struggles, and inhibits open communication.
- If I have confidence that leaders will take my concerns into consideration, I can openly give recommendations that reach beyond my '*position power*,' and focus myself on the work that is within my sphere of influence.

The Decision Making Grid identifies six kinds of influences that a person might have on a decision. These include: [(Blank) -- May recommend or suggest, (I) Must be informed, (C) Must be consulted, (P) Must participate, (V) Veto power. (A) Authority to make decision] (Schmuck, et al., 1972). The Grid provides a procedure to clarify what influence each person would have in the various types of decisions that are made by the group, so that everyone knows what role he or she plays (*position power*).

This Decision Making Grid would not replace an organizational chart. It would not replace workflow processes. The Grid enhances these to clarify for each individual the '*position power*' he or she has in the decision process. **Such models are useful to guide leaders in building an atmosphere of inclusion in decision making, while still creating a clear chain of command that produces timely results.**

Case Study: Decision Making Grid

An educational organization put together a diverse team of specialists to develop training programs. This team included an Educator (Educ), a school administrator (Admin), a script writer (Writer), and the team leader (Lead) who was also the company's Educational Department Director with authority over the team (*position power*).

The Writer wrote a first draft, others added their input, and then they would meet to discuss and edit. The process was confusing at first because different people had different objectives, and different areas of specialty that they wanted emphasized. Therefore it took a long time to produce a product.

The team agreed to create a Decision-Making Grid to clarify each person's involvement at each stage in the development of the product. A work process chart showed each stage in the process of creating the educational material, from outlining objectives to writing first drafts, to editing for various factors as age and school appropriateness, and finally for grammar.

Educational Team's Decision-Making Grid

	<u>Lead</u>	<u>Admin</u>	<u>Educ</u>	<u>Writer</u>
Objectives	A	A	V	V
1 st Draft	C	C	C	A
Techniques	P	P	V	A
Age	A	A	V	I
School	V	A	C	C
Confidential	C	C	A	C
Grammar	A	—	—	—

[(Blank) -- May recommend or suggest, (I) Must be informed, (C) Must be consulted, (P) Must participate, (V) Veto power, (A) Authority to make decision]

The team agreed to seek consensus on development of the program content, while still recognizing the degrees of influence outlined in the Grid. For example, the Writer wrote the first draft (A) with suggestions from others (C), and had the final say (A) with the models or techniques being used. When discussion focused around issues of school appropriateness, the Writer and Educator could give suggestions (C), but Admin had the final decision (A) in a disagreement – however, the Lead could require further discussion (V). Each person had authority in his or her area of specialty, and they agreed on an approach that sought consensus. This structure greatly facilitated the team's ability to communicate, resulting in faster product development.

But any model can be sabotaged by an authority figure who ultimately defines what role anyone plays in decisions. Arguments eventually arose in the editing meetings. Often, when the Team Lead disagreed, the conversation would go back and forth until the Lead said, "I guess we will have to agree to disagree." The other team members eventually learned that when this was said, the Department Director's *position power* would override whatever influence they had written in the Grid. They learned that, in practice, no one truly had an (A) or even a (V) except the Lead. Eventually the team members did not offer opposing opinions freely, knowing that their input would not be included. The products were still produced, but team members withheld creative input.

This demonstrates the risk that an authority figure takes in the consensus process by imposing an authority decision, even if he or she thinks that decision is right. Employees learn to withhold their input, because their effort will not produce results. Even the legendary Konosuke Matsushita once told a section chief, "Only about 40 percent of the decisions I approve are ones I really agree with; the other 60 percent I have reservations about but I okay them anyway. . . I think a person in charge of others has to okay some things he doesn't really like. It is still possible

to see that necessary adjustments are made over the long run.”
(Matsushita)

The training team in this case study had each person’s “influence” clearly defined at every step of the product development. The team agreed in principle to seek consensus, to make sure that each person felt completely understood and free to express, and that each person’s expertise received the proper level of influence in decisions. But the leader was uncomfortable in situations where people with strong convictions entered spirited discussions. She ended them quickly by “agreeing to disagree,” and then used her *position power* to avoid the discomfort.

This example shows that all the organizational structure in the world will not overcome the negative personal power of a leader who is not able to build an atmosphere in which it is safe to disagree.

Building an atmosphere in which it is safe to disagree

Even if the decision-making structure is clear, resistance could emerge from ineffective uses of *personal power*. This may include unresolved disagreements or misunderstandings, personality clashes between individuals, favoritism, or from the fear of dealing directly with conflict. Most of these misuses of *personal power* are perceived as disrespectful behaviors.

While leaders do need to give attention to the organizational structures that establish *position power*, they must also give attention to the organizational cultures that influence *personal power*. In her study of academic leadership, Adriana Kezar observes that most studies “focused almost exclusively on structural theories and to a lesser extent on political theories,” and that the “human dynamics have remained under-investigated.” According to Kezar, “Human relations, cultural, and social cognition theories remain underutilized theoretical frameworks in the study of (faculty) governance, especially for exploring human conditions that affect governance” (Kezar, 2002).

According to John Bennett, relational power “involves the authority that others bestow upon the leader when he or she genuinely consults and freely communicates with them” (Bennett, 2001). When used appropriately, this relational power, akin to Ramey and Lucas’s *personal power*, is less likely than *position power* to meet resistance, because the

latter is imposed while the former is earned and freely given. But when misused, the result is that people feel misunderstood and disrespected.

In order to encourage everyone to productively use their *personal power* in the decision making process, (and to avoid the various destructive uses of *personal power*) leaders must build an atmosphere of respect that leads to trust. To do this, leaders must also practice these principles in one-on-one communication and problem solving with everyone, and must establish common methods by which people can resolve their misunderstandings and disagreements respectfully.

Rosabeth Moss-Kantor points out the importance of building trust at all levels of the organization:

“Many alliances unravel because, while there is support at the top of the organization, departments at lower levels are left to resolve tensions, answer questions, or fill gaps on their own. The conflicts and wasted efforts can end up destroying value instead of creating it. You have to make sure that the goals of people at many levels of the organizations are aligned, and that people get to know each other, before you can expect them to build trust.” (Moss-Kantor, 1999)

But how can people feel free to express their concerns if a leader acts defensively when faced with conflicts, and discourages disagreement and dissent? One of the barriers to effective leadership identified by Frances Hesselbein, president and CEO of the Drucker Foundation, is the practice of killing the messenger (Hesselbein 2002). In many organizations, people who disagree with the leadership are not considered “team players.” If one agrees with the leaders one is considered to have a positive team attitude, and will more likely grow into positions of leadership. While this may appear to be a problem of rigid organizational structure that does not allow input from lower levels, it is actually an organizational culture issue caused by inappropriate use of *personal power*. The organizational structure may provide for channels of communication, but the people in those positions inhibit the free flow of information.

In his excellent article on The Trouble with Teamwork, Patrick Lencioni explains why trust is so essential, and how it can only develop in an atmosphere in which it is safe to disagree.

- “The first and most important step in building a cohesive and functional team is the establishment of trust. But not just any kind of trust. Teamwork must be built upon a solid foundation of vulnerability-based trust. This means that members of a cohesive, functional team must learn to comfortably and quickly acknowledge, without provocation, their mistakes,

weaknesses, failures, and needs for help. They must also readily recognize the strengths of others, even when those strengths exceed their own. . . . Showing vulnerability is unnatural for many leaders, who were raised to project strength and confidence in the face of difficulty.

- “There is a very practical reason why vulnerability-based trust is indispensable. Without it, a team will not, and probably should not, engage in unfiltered productive conflict.
- “What CEOs and their teams must do is learn to **identify artificial harmony when they see it, and incite productive conflict in its place**. This is a messy process, one that takes time to master. But there is no avoiding it, because to do so makes it next to impossible for a team to make real commitment.
- “Teams that fail to disagree and exchange unfiltered opinions are the ones that find themselves revisiting the same issues again and again. All this is ironic, because the teams that appear to an outside observer to be the most dysfunctional (the arguers) are usually the ones that can arrive at and stick with a difficult decision.” (Lencioni 2003)

As Lencioni proposes, it can be messy and time consuming to facilitate productive conflict. And it is easier said than done. Leaders need communication tools to develop this art, and to establish norms within the organization so that others feel safe that these norms will be followed to support them when they have a concern to express.

However, these authors have known many people who are skillfully proficient with a variety of listening and negotiation techniques, but who do not build working relationships of trust and mutual cooperation. So, before exploring specific communication techniques and models, we will examine the relationship between two fundamental keys that must exist in any group before communication skills can be used effectively. These are the keys of *understanding* and *respect*.

Reducing Resistance to Change and Conflict: A Key to Successful Leadership

Article Three: Understanding and Respect

By Stephen Haslam and Robert Pennington, Ph.D.,
Resource International

This is the third in a series of articles that examines the essential role of a leader in reducing resistance to change, in order to promote growth in an organization. The first article explored basic models of change that help us understand why resistance occurs (CBAM – the Concerns Based Adoption Model by Frances Fuller (Hall, et. al. 1972) and The Stages of Transition and the Four P's of Transition by William Bridges and Susan Mitchell (Bridges & Mitchell 2000)). The second article presented models of decision-making, and explored why it is important to build an organizational culture in which it is safe for employees to disagree with one another and with management.

This article examines the relationship between two fundamental keys that must exist in any group before communication can be effective. These are the keys of *understanding* and *respect*.

The relationship between misunderstandings and disagreements

When the “soft skills” of listening and understanding are taught as important management techniques people often respond with comments such as, “Yeah, I know all that stuff about listening. But I don’t have time for that. There is too much important work to get done.” The implication here is that the cost of time and human resources invested into listening and understanding is not worth the return. Let’s examine the costs of not listening, which in turn create a work environment in which people do not feel understood.

In a 2003 survey, 256 employees of a government organization were asked, “What percentage of disagreements do you think are caused by misunderstandings?” The average response was 71%, with a range of responses from 5-99%. Participants were then asked, “Of the disagreements that are caused by misunderstandings, what percentage of those are caused because *you* misunderstand?” The average response was 39%, with a range of responses from 0-100%. Suddenly the numbers are significantly reduced! (See *Appendix: Communication Survey*) Most people admit that, in the middle of a disagreement, the other person needs to understand. Of course the other person is thinking the same thing of them. Everyone wants to be understood, but everyone is waiting for the other person to do it first. (Resource 2003)

If it is true that most disagreements are caused by misunderstandings, then when the misunderstanding is resolved and understanding occurs, there is no disagreement. This suggests that anywhere from 50-90% of the time people disagree with one another, they actually have an agreement that already exists. Someone is just misunderstanding. It also suggests that the ability to create clear understanding will resolve a large percentage of disagreements.

Unfortunately, when faced with a disagreement many people respond by trying to get the opposing person to let go of his or her opposing position and agree with their own position. Often this pressure causes resistance, even if both people actually want the same thing. Being aware of these three different categories of disagreements can give leaders valuable insight into resolving conflicts.

Categories of Disagreements

Category 1: Misunderstandings: These disagreements are simply misunderstandings. In this category, when you make sure everyone is understood you find that there is no disagreement, simply a misunderstanding. You actually had an agreement, but someone just misunderstood. Most people believe that 50-90% of disagreements fall into this category.

Category 2: Negotiable Disagreements: In this category, there is no misunderstanding. You do disagree. But the solution is negotiable. One side or another is willing to make an adjustment because it is not an absolute requirement. The question to ask here is, “What would it take for me to want to do what they want me to do?” Most people believe that anywhere from 8-40% of disagreements fall into this category.

Category 3: Non-Negotiable Disagreements: In this category, not only is there no misunderstanding, but there is no negotiation. Each side has taken an absolute stand for their fundamental requirements. But even when this is true, one thing might be a requirement for one person, but not a requirement for another person. So there may still be room for negotiation. Most people find that only 2-5% of disagreements fall into this category. But many people respond to all disagreements as if they are in this last category where there is no alternative but their own point of view, and so they are not able to recognize and thus resolve misunderstandings and negotiable disagreements. (Resource 1993)

A great deal of emphasis has been given to the skill of *understanding*, in order to resolve disagreements, establish trust, build cooperation, and reduce resistance. This is certainly not a new concept. But different people have a different understanding of what it is to “be understanding.”

Understanding What Understanding Really Is

Plato is known to have said, “No law or ordinance is mightier than understanding.” (Cooper 1997) However, **it is ironic that the concept of understanding may be widely misunderstood.** The process of communicating information from one mind to another is often imprecise.

Too often people believe that understanding occurs when they think they understand. But how do you know that what you think I said is what I really meant? Does understanding occur when you think you understand? Or does it occur when the other person feels understood?

It may be true that the receiver fully understands what the speaker has communicated, both verbally and nonverbally. The receiver may even understand more clearly than the speaker. However, if the speaker feels misunderstood, he or she is still likely to feel unsupported and will resist the receiver’s input. **In order to reduce this resistance, the receiver should focus on making sure the speaker feels understood, before trying to express another point of view.** This is especially true if the receiver disagrees. In physics, when there is less resistance it takes less energy to move an object (Henderson 2001). In relationships, when there is less emotional resistance it takes less effort to influence another person.

Unfortunately, most people grow up feeling misunderstood by authority figures. Few children ever hear their parents stop in the middle of a disagreement and say, “I’m sorry, what did you want me to know about that?” When these children grow into adulthood they expect other authority figures to act with the same disregard for their input. In psychology this is referred to as transference.

It is an unfortunate reality that managers, supervisors, and leaders at any level will have to deal with this unconscious transference of resistance to authority by their employees. Since this challenge of transference is inevitable, it becomes even more important for leaders to develop the skill of reducing the expected resistance to authority by making people feel understood.

But making sure people feel understood is not just an emotional feel-good fix, and it does not simply mean agreeing with people in order to avoid conflict. Again, the emphasis here is on how to reduce resistance before trying to get one’s point across. The goal is not just to make the other person feel good.

Using the phrase “help the other person *feel* understood” may imply that one must somehow avoid making the other person feel bad, and instead make them feel good. While such emotions may result when a person is understood, it is not the goal. Too often, people simply try to avoid the discomfort of conflict in order to establish a “feel-good atmosphere,” which only results in a false harmony that suppresses honest and open communication. As Lencioni stated, leaders must

“identify artificial harmony when they see it, and incite productive conflict in its place.” (Lencioni 2003)

Making sure people feel understood does not mean agreeing with them. You can disagree with people and still make sure they feel understood. You can agree with people and they may still feel misunderstood. Often, people may be willing to accept a disagreement if they feel understood. In the Resource survey, 96% of respondents said they would be more likely to do something they agreed with if their supervisor took the time to sincerely understand their concerns. (Resource 2003.) Conversely, many people will not even accept an agreement if they feel misunderstood. What is important is that people (1) recognize and (2) confirm that what you know is what they mean.

Virginia Satir has said that much of what people communicate is done nonverbally, leaving more in between the lines than in the actual script (Satir 1988). Therefore one must not only ensure that one understands what the person said, but also what they did not say – but meant to say. This also becomes a process for getting people to take responsibility for what they are saying, and for what they are leaving unsaid. Some people are very skilled at sounding kind and supportive on one level while leaving unsettling implications that breed dissent. A good example of this is a person who is demonstrating passive-aggressive behavior. He may be verbally passive by not saying anything, but nonverbally aggressive with a derogatory glance or sigh. A skilled leader can bring these implications out in the open where they can be openly discussed and resolved. The Five Levels of a Clear Communication[®] and the Six Stages for Building Supportive Agreements[®], described below, are two models developed by Resource International that help achieve such clarity and understanding.

Being understanding is too often associated with being soft and being a pushover. In the 2003 survey of 256 government employees (Resource 2003), 64% said they were concerned that people would take advantage of them if they tried to be understanding during an argument. This is another common misconception of what understanding truly is. According to Dale Carnegie, “Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain, and most fools do. But it takes character and self control to be understanding and forgiving (Carnegie 1990).” One can forgive people for what they have said or done, and still set clear guidelines and hold people accountable for the consequences of their behaviors.

According to Webster’s New World Dictionary (Webster 1968), the word *understand* originates from the Old English *understandan* “to stand under or among.” One can infer from this that the meaning of being understanding is to stand under, or to provide support for another’s point of view, not in the sense of agreeing but in allowing.

The Martial Art of Communication

Consider an analogy from the martial arts. To gain leverage over an opponent, a martial artist first establishes firm footing. Next he absorbs the enemy's blows by being fluid and flexible. He then establishes common ground by positioning himself as close as possible to the opponent with a lower center of gravity, which provides leverage to move the opponent. He gains leverage by "standing under" the opponent. If he uses that leverage to cause harm, he might win the battle but lose the war, because the opponent is likely to continue fighting for revenge.

Now consider this – A takes one side of an argument, B takes an opposing side, and they argue to prove which position is right and which is wrong. If A attacks and causes B to feel hurt and angry, what will B try to cause A to feel in order to achieve revenge? Probably hurt and anger, with compounded interest. Notice that the goal of revenge is an "understanding" of the hurt and anger. Because B wants A to understand B's pain, B is motivated to cause A to feel pain. Then the cycle of pain continues.



But what if A first focuses on understanding B? B does not feel the pain of being misunderstood, and so is less likely to be defensive or aggressive. A can reduce B's resistance to A's ideas or suggestions more quickly, establish common ground from which a common agreement can be built. The goal can be accomplished without the pain and therefore with less effort.



One must stand firmly for one's fundamental requirements (Be Firm), be flexible regarding one's preferences (Be Flexible), avoid imposing on others while simultaneously not letting them walk all over you (Be Balanced), and actively seek to understand the other person's viewpoint (Be Actively Receptive). To master these four Be-Attitudes of the Martial Art of Communication® (Resource 1993) is an art. It is much easier said than done.

The teachings from The Art of War, by Sun Tzu, and The Book of Five Rings, by Miyamoto Musashi (Sun Tzu 1991, Musashi 1993), have provided guidance to businessmen, politicians, and military strategists on successful strategy and leadership. Thomas Cleary's introduction reveals, "... in Sun Tzu's philosophy the peak efficiency of knowledge and strategy is to make conflict altogether unnecessary." Cleary indicates that an aggressive leader who combines force with authority is not really ruthless, but is instead "an emotionalist". What a superior leader needs is objectivity, an ability to step outside of one's own

understanding of the situation (Sun Tzu 1991).

But according to Cleary this is “an objectivity that includes oneself in its cutting assessment of the real situation (Sun Tzu 1991).” A superior leader considers all viewpoints objectively, including one’s own, before deciding on a course of action. According to Kenneth Rose (Rose, 2002), John Kotter says, “a leader needs enough understanding to fashion an intelligent strategy.” A leader who establishes an atmosphere in which people can freely express their concerns, knowing that the leadership will seek to understand and respond to these concerns, will gather much more valuable information from those people, and meet much less resistance in implementing strategies.

The kind of *understanding* being described here is synonymous with *respect*. The word *respect* derives from the Latin root word, *respectare*, the root of which is *spectare*, which means, “to look” (Webster 1968). This is the same root for words such as *spectacles* or *perspective*. “Re”-*spectare* means to look back, or to look again at something. **To give respect to someone is to be able to step outside of one’s own perspective, and look back at it from another person’s point of view.** This aligns with the meaning of the root word, *understandan*, “to stand among” (Webster 1968). This does not necessarily mean that one agrees with the other person. To know whether one disagrees, one must first understand what the other person thinks. To further reduce that person’s resistance, one must make sure that he or she feels understood.

This sounds suspiciously similar to what has been described in this article as making sure the other person experiences feeling clearly understood. For a leader to establish a respectful relationship with others, he or she must be able to communicate a clear understanding for their concerns, and show how such concerns are being addressed. Consider the following case study from a government organization.

A Case Study in Respect and Understanding

A Manager of a government facility had been approving work orders for the carpentry department for twenty-six years. One day it occurred to him that he had never actually gone onsite to evaluate these jobs, or to check on progress. He habitually signed off on work orders, and left onsite responsibility to the front line Supervisor. He realized that he did not know what the Supervisor did, so the Manager went to watch the repair work on a doorway in a loading dock. After a few minutes he got the information he needed, and returned to his desk to continue signing work orders.

Three years later while working with teambuilding consultants, the Supervisor finally took the risk to bring up his upset about this incident as an example of how the Manager did not respect the Supervisor’s work. He recounted when the Manager had come to watch over his work

because he didn't trust him to get it done right. The Manager patiently focused on repeating what the Supervisor was saying, in order to help the supervisor feel understood. He didn't agree or disagree. He avoided justifying, defending himself, or saying such obvious things as, "It's my job to oversee your work!" The Manager first made sure that the Supervisor felt understood on five levels, then confirmed what he did agree with by saying such things as, "Yes, I do remember coming to look at the work on that door," and "You're right, I did not talk to you about it. I can understand why that would have been suspicious and frustrating for you."

The consultants made sure that the conversation continued until the Supervisor confirmed, "Yes, the Manager does understand everything that is important to me about this incident." They then asked the Supervisor if he had ever taken the initiative to talk to the Manager to clear up the situation. The Supervisor said, "Oh course not. Since he doesn't respect me he won't listen to what I have to say." The consultants asked if the Manager had ever done this before or after this incident. The Supervisor considered this and replied, "Well, no, I guess not." So they asked if he would be interested in hearing what the Manager thought.

The Manager expressed how he had always been so impressed with the Supervisor's work that he never felt the need to watch over him. He explained that he had come to observe the work on that one doorway because he was curious. When he saw what good work was being done, he walked away knowing that his original impression that the work was in good hands had been correct. He had renewed his complete respect and trust in the Supervisor's work, and that's why he had never checked out any other work sites since that day.

Unfortunately, for the past three years the Supervisor had nursed his resentment at being disrespected, had communicated it to any person who would listen and was constantly dissatisfied in his relationship with his Manager. He shared his upset with people who also felt misunderstood. A misperception spread throughout the organization that management did not respect the skills and judgment of the front line supervisors.

The irony is that the Manager had tremendous respect for this Supervisor. But he did not communicate this respect clearly to the supervisor, who consequently felt misunderstood and disrespected. To be an effective leader, it is not enough to think you respect someone. For the respect to have impact, the person must know and confirm that you understand his or her concerns. The person must experience the respect. When the Supervisor recognized the Manager understood his concerns, he considered the possibility that respect did exist. That did not heal three years of hurt, but it began the process of rebuilding trust.

Although everyone knows it is important to be respectful and understanding, this is easier said than done in everyday practice. The fourth article in this series presents a collection of individual communication techniques and group processes that can help build these principles as common practices.

Appendix

August, 2003 Resource International Survey on attitudes about resistance to authority in work relationships

A range of employee attitudes concerning resistance to authority was measured, including sabotage, not doing a good job, doing the minimum required, and not being motivated to do a task with which they disagree. Employees anticipated that when their supervisor treats them with disrespect, up to 74% of respondents would exhibit varying degrees of resistance. Resistance was still present in 71% of employees, even when employees agree with the task given to them by their supervisor. But employees' attitudes about resistance drops significantly to 29% when they think their supervisors treat them respectfully, decreasing the more severe forms of resistance (doing minimum, not doing good job, sabotage) by as much as 58%. When treated respectfully by a supervisor, 42% more employees (a 59% increase!) believe they are likely to eagerly do a task with which they disagree, and do everything they can to do a good job. This suggests that respectful behavior from an authority figure is more likely to reduce resistance and increase motivation than will trying to get employees to agree.

Situation	Employee + task + attitude				
	do <u>eagerly</u>	do <u>not motivated</u>	do <u>minimum</u>	not do <u>good job</u>	not do <u>+sabotage</u>
+ Supervisor behavior					
Disagree +Disrespect	26%	55%	15%	3%	1%
Agree +Disrespect	29%	59%	11%	1%	1%
Disagree +Respect	71%	23%	6%	2%	0%

Reducing Resistance to Change and Conflict: A Key to Successful Leadership

Article Four: Reducing Resistance is Easier Said Than Done

By Stephen Haslam and Robert Pennington, Ph.D.,
Resource International

This is the fourth in a series of articles that examines the essential role of a leader in reducing resistance to change, in order to promote growth in an organization. The first article explored basic models of change that help us understand why resistance occurs (CBAM – the Concerns Based Adoption Model by Frances Fuller (Hall, et. al. 1972) and The Stages of Transition and the Four P's of Transition by William Bridges and Susan Mitchell (Bridges & Mitchell 2000)). The second article presented models of decision-making, and explored why it is important to build an organizational culture in which it is safe for employees to disagree with one another and with management. In the third article, *understanding* and *respect* were presented as two fundamental keys to an effective organizational culture. This article presents communication techniques and group processes that can be used to make respectful behavior a common practice in individual and group behavior.

Sharpening the saw

An ancient oriental proverb states, “To know and not to do is to not know.” Understanding, respect, trust – they are commonly accepted to be important in developing successful work relationships. But they are all easier said than done. It is not enough to simply have the idea that these things are important. One must practice them daily. A martial artist practices basic techniques for balance, strength, flexibility, and agility, before he enters into a conflict. So too, leaders need to follow basic techniques to be firm, clear, understanding, and respectful, so that when misunderstandings and disagreements occur they can demonstrate these qualities automatically, rather than reacting defensively or aggressively. Stephen Covey referred to this practice as “sharpening the saw,” a continual habit of learning followed by all great leaders. (Covey 1989)

There are many such techniques for improving one-to-one communication and for facilitating respectful behavior in groups. The following sections present a set of integrated techniques that can be modeled by leaders, and taught to all employees. The ultimate objective of using these techniques is to establish a work environment in which everyone feels safe to disagree so that communication is more open and work is more productive.

- **Three Questions to Reduce Misunderstandings[©]**
- **The Be-Attitudes of the Martial Art of Communication[©]**
- **Clear Communication:** Five Levels of A Clear Communication[©]
- **Constructive Feedback:** The Feedback Sandwich[©]
- **Creating Supportive Agreements:** Six Stages of Creating Supportive Agreements[©]

Three Questions to Reduce Misunderstandings[©]

There are so many books and trainings on the topic of active listening one would think that by now everyone would have become an expert. Unfortunately, in the middle of a disagreement or misunderstanding most people are hit by an automatic emotional wave that knocks all communication skills out of the window. So it is actually important to have some very basic guidelines that may seem ridiculously simple. The simpler they are, the easier they are to practice. Here is a simple analogy to keep in mind the next time you feel your emotional wave overflowing.



As illustrated in figure to the left, the glass represents you, and the water is your thoughts. The second glass to the right represents the other person, and the water in that glass represents his thoughts.



The splashing water in glasses to the right shows you what an argument looks like. You are trying to get some of your thoughts into him, and he is trying to get some of his thoughts into you. A little exchange is actually happening, but generally it just makes a big mess.



What would happen if you just started pouring your water into his glass? Of course, it would overflow all over the floor. He is too full of his ideas, so there is no room for yours. You need to create some openness. Some people try to do this by punching a hole in the other person's cup, puncturing his ego by pointing

out that he is wrong. But if you attack the other person, he is not likely to want to listen to you. He may go back to friends who agree with him, until his ego is repaired. Then he will return to argue with you again because he knows you did not understand him.



It is true that you need the other person to be more open, but there is another way to accomplish this. Take your thoughts and set them aside for a moment. These thoughts will be there when you get back. Create some openness in yourself first, and just as he expects you to argue with him, stop and say,



1. ***"This is really important. What is it you want me to know?"*** Become a receptive force, drawing information out of the other person. He will pour his 'water' into you. Repeat his words back without adding any of your own 'water glass thoughts' (*we'll deal with those later*), just to make sure you are clear.
2. And then you say, ***"Is there anything else?"*** What do you think is the likelihood that the other person has more thoughts that he has not yet shared? Pretty good. He will pour some more water, while you repeat his words just to make sure you are clear.
3. Finally you say, ***"Is that all?"*** Pause, and give the other person time to think. You want to squeeze all water you can out, to create as much open space as possible for him to consider your ideas.

The simple truth is this: **if you want get people to become open to your ideas or suggestions, first be open to considering theirs.** This is the simple principle of "seek first to understand." (Covey 1989)

The Be-Attitudes of the Martial Art of Communication

The following four principles must be juggled at all times in order to maintain equilibrium in a disagreement or misunderstanding (Resource 1993).

1. Be Firm

Know your own position - what you believe and what you want. Stand firmly for your fundamental requirements. Know and communicate your preferences, but don't push too hard. When expressing yourself be clear about the difference between a firm expectation and a possible suggestion, between a "not negotiable" requirement and a preference. You don't have to defend your position to be confident in it. You don't have to make others wrong to know you are right.

2. Be Flexible

Be willing to adjust your preferences, but don't give them away for free. Continue to be curious whenever other people express resistance. When you run into a block, reconfirm common agreements and then ask questions to resolve misunderstandings. Be willing to look at your point of view from theirs. Be curious about why they don't already know what you

want them to know. Learn everything you can about what is in the way of them seeing your point of view by becoming an expert on theirs.

3. Be Actively Receptive

Develop leverage by helping other people feel understood. Learn to be receptive, especially to ideas with which you disagree. Actively assist others in expressing their opinions more fully. Remember that understanding occurs when the other person feels understood, not when you think you understand. Receptivity absorbs. It is an active force. It is not "being passive."

4. Be Balanced

Don't be pushy, but don't be a pushover. Don't let your fundamental requirements impose on others, but don't let others take advantage of you. Balance firmness and flexibility by developing a sense of timing for when to express and when to listen, when to be firm and when to adjust, when to put your ideas out there and when to actively pull their ideas out of them.

Clear Communication

Fielding Cooley (Cooley 1994) proposed that an autocratic approach to resolving differences does not help people apply what they know and can do to influence a situation. He outlines how to use an awareness of Schmuck and Runkel's three types of conflict: conflicts over values, facts, and strategies (Schmuck & Runkel, 1985) to better facilitate a resolution of differences. These levels are also reflected in Virginia Satir's five levels of a communication. Resource International's adaptation (Resource 1993) of Satir's five levels (facts, thoughts/opinions, emotions, meaning/importance, action/expectation) provides a communication tool for leaders to address Schmuck and Runkel's three types of conflict.

*Virginia Satir's
Five Levels Of Communication*
Facts
Thoughts/Opinions
Emotions
Meaning/Importance
Actions/Expectations

*Schmuck & Runkel's
3 Levels of Conflict*
Facts
Values
Values
Values
Strategies

During the 1960s and 1970s, Virginia Satir suggested that as much as seventy percent of what people communicate is done nonverbally. This could mean that people listen more to what is in between the lines than to what you literally say. It also suggests that if you don't clearly say everything you mean, others may fill

in the blanks and make up their own mind about what you are thinking (Satir 1988).

Satir outlined five basic levels that are a part of communication between two people. These five levels of a clear communication provide a blueprint to make sure that misunderstanding does not occur.

1. **Facts:** Clearly state the facts, as they have occurred. Describe what literally happened, without judgment or interpretation. You may check to see if the other person is aware of these facts, and if he has other important pieces of information that need to be considered. People often put across their own beliefs as objective facts (i.e. "You don't respect me.") Don't. This is more likely to cause other people to disagree with you and to try to make you wrong. When there is not clear agreement on facts, you need more information.
2. **Thoughts/Opinions:** Communicate your thoughts and opinions about the situation. Facts are neutral. They become positive or negative, good or bad, right or wrong when you make a judgment about them. Thoughts are your subjective response to the objective facts. Through thoughts and opinions, you communicate your evaluation of the facts. This second level includes your attitudes, preferences, and opinions about the facts. Do not communicate your thoughts as if they are facts by stating an opinion like, "The fact is you are wrong." Often, people will have less resistance to your opinions if you first clarify the objective facts, and then offer your subjective opinions as possibilities, not as rigid positions.
3. **Emotions:** Clearly state your feelings or emotions. You can either control your emotions or your emotions will control you. Emotions will be expressed unconsciously if you do not express them consciously. When you suppress or repress an emotion it becomes unconscious and controls your behavior. To control emotions effectively, you must acknowledge them consciously. Let the other person know that he may have sensed some emotion from you, and that you want to clarify. Let him know you will take responsibility for your own emotion without blaming him for it, and you still want to communicate to him what you believe is important: "I know I may be feeling angry, and I don't want my anger to get in the way of working this out," or "I feel hurt by what you did, so I want to make sure you understand why this is important to me."

Sometimes people mistake their thoughts and opinions for emotions. They may say, "I feel that you do not understand me," or "I feel you should not be treating me this way." These feelings are not emotions, they are opinions. Sentences that begin with "I feel that _____," are most likely not a statement of emotion, but a statement of opinion. You may think that someone does not understand you, and you may feel hurt or angry in

response. Because of what you think (thoughts) about what happened (facts), you may be hurt or angry (emotions). But your communication does not end here. Two more levels must be involved which clarify why this issue is important to you, and what your expectations are.

4. **Importance/Priorities:** Describe what is important to you about the situation. Take a moment to consider your thoughts and emotions, state what these mean to you, what is important to you and why you think and feel as you do. Any emotion you experience indicates deeper beliefs or priorities that are important to you. You may disagree with the other person about facts or opinions, and both may still hold the same goals and priorities. This can provide a basis for cooperation even when you have different points of view. And if you do not clearly state your priorities, others are likely to make assumptions and fill in the blanks. Eliminating any of the five levels of communication adds fuel to the misunderstanding.
5. **Actions/Expectations:** Clearly express your expectations, the action you want to take as a result of this discussion. Don't stay stuck in the emotion of the moment. Don't expect the other person to guess. Be clear. Be clear enough to identify what you would like the other person to do, and what you will do.

It is important to state this expectation in a positive way. You may expect the other person to misunderstand you. You may expect him to be uncooperative. But this is not really what you want. You want him to understand, you want him to cooperate. You may tend to think that if he really respects you he will know what you want, and will respond accordingly. Whether he knows what you want has nothing to do with whether or not he respects you or cares about you. It has to do with whether you have told him clearly, directly, and concisely what you want of him and of yourself.

Usually, if seventy percent of what you communicate is done nonverbally, you may not consciously think about what you say on each of these five levels of communication during a normal conversation. Consequently, it may be difficult to suddenly begin measuring all your words in five easy steps. You need to develop a familiarity with each level in order to comfortably use them in a stressful moment. One very effective way to develop this familiarity is to hold the model of the five levels in your mind as a blueprint while you listen to other people. You could actively ask questions about each level, interviewing others until you completely understand what facts they know, their opinions and feelings, what they believe is important, and what they want to do. The following example shows how effective these levels can be as an interview technique for resolving a misunderstanding.

Case Study: The Five Level Interview (Resource 1993)

Greta worked as a marketing representative for a training firm. She worried for two months about an important issue, but was afraid to talk to her boss, Steve, because she believed he would not listen. When she finally brought it to him she was very nervous and upset. Steve thought she had a problem and was asking for a solution. But no matter what he suggested to solve the problem, she just kept complaining, and they could not reach an agreement.

Steve realized that as long as Greta felt misunderstood she would continue to resist his input. So he used the five levels of communication as a reflective listening tool to clarify misunderstandings on each of the five levels. The following example is a reconstruction of the actual conversation, according to Steve.

The Five Level Interview:**Facts**

Steve: Please help me be clear. What did these people say to you?

Greta: People are complaining that we teach the same material over and over again in programs with different titles.

Steve: So, the same material, but different titles. You spoke directly with people who took the classes?

Greta: Yes, that's right.

Steve: Were there any comments in the written evaluations?

Greta: Oh, uh, yes there were.

Steve: With written and verbal comments, how many people have communicated with you?

Greta: Oh, I guess I heard from about three or four people.

Steve: So you have this feedback from three or four people. How many people would you say have taken our classes altogether?

Greta: Hmm. Well, I guess at least one thousand people. *(Steve was careful not to press this point at the moment, so Greta would not become defensive again.)*

Steve: Have the Human Resource directors made any negative comments?

Greta: Well, no.

Steve: And have these people spoken to the HR directors?

Greta: No, not yet.

Steve: Did they say they would?

Greta: Well, no. But I know they will!

Notice how much time was spent just digging for and clarifying the facts by restating what Greta was saying. This must be done objectively, without a tone in the voice that delivers a message of criticism between the lines.

Thoughts/Opinions

Steve: So they haven't talked with the directors yet, but you think they might?

Greta: Right!

Steve: You believe that people will think poorly about our work, and our reputation will suffer because the decision-makers will hear about it.

Greta: Of course.

Emotions

Steve: Of course, you are concerned. This must be very upsetting to you.

Greta: Yes, and it should be important to you too!

Meaning/Importance

Steve: Yes, it is important that there be no doubts about the quality of our work, otherwise we could lose business in the future.

Greta: That's right, we would. That's what I've been trying to tell you!

Actions

Steve: You have obviously put a lot of thought into this. What do you recommend we do?

Greta: Well, we need to have clearly distinct programs that do not repeat each other, with accurate program outlines and descriptions for each one.

(At this point Steve breathed deeply and practiced stress management techniques!)

Steve: OK. And do you think this will solve the problem?

Greta: Yes, that should do it.

Steve: Great. I do too. What would you like me to do?

Greta: Well, you can do the program outlines and descriptions!

Steve: OK, I can do that tonight, and fax it to you first thing in the morning.

A Win/Win Solution

No matter how much Steve had previously tried to give Greta the same solution, she could not accept it because she did not feel understood about her full communication. She wasn't even fully clear about what she was thinking. When Steve took the time to listen and to interview Greta, her resistance dissolved, and they easily reached a win/win solution.

Greta had avoided the conflict for two months. The original argument repeated for ninety minutes. The interview reached a solution in less than ten minutes. This was one situation where the disagreement was caused by misunderstanding. They actually had an agreement on the solution, which was clarified with understanding.

Being actively receptive need not take a lot of time. It takes a sincere interest to understand, a foundation in the Be-Attitudes of the Martial Arts, and familiarity with each of the Five Levels of Communication. In the long

run it saves time because you don't have to deal with the resistance, misunderstandings, and arguments. To develop this familiarity you need to practice until each level becomes a habit. Then when you are in a difficult situation you will be less likely to do what Steve did during the first hour of this example, by becoming defensive or argumentative. When you have established in the other person the feeling of being understood, then she is more prepared for your feedback.

Constructive Feedback

Giving feedback is the process of giving information back to someone about his or her actions or behaviors. Feedback gives the person information about how his or her behavior has affected you. But notice, the word is “feedback”, not “giveback”. It is supposed to nourish the person who is receiving it. And it should contribute to the relationship so that both parties benefit. But the feedback process can backfire if you force the other person to hear your viewpoint whether he likes it or not, or if you intentionally withhold information from the person. Feedback can definitely taste sour if it is passed through someone else before it finally gets to the person for whom it is intended.

It can be difficult to give feedback constructively, comfortably, and firmly so you get your point across without triggering the other person's defenses. Here are some typical examples of situations in which it is difficult to communicate:

- Saying NO to something you don't want to do, whether it is a request or an instruction.
- Telling someone who gets on your nerves to change his behavior.
- Giving someone bad news which he doesn't want to hear.
- Asking for something you think the other person will have a difficult time doing for you or giving to you.
- Telling someone that something he is doing causes problems for him, for his job, or for you.
- Giving an evaluation to an employee.

This section will not focus on telling you what decisions to make in resolving such challenges. Instead, the focus will be on how to communicate difficult messages or feedback in the face of resistance. The three stages of The Feedback Sandwich can help the constructive criticism be clearer, firmer, and easier to accept. (Resource 1993)

The Feedback Sandwich

Step One: Appreciation

Appreciate the person: Generally, it is best to first help the person feel understood about his or her concerns before presenting the feedback, because that understanding helps reduce the person's resistance. You

can also reduce resistance to your feedback by expressing appreciation for something about the person that you recognize is valuable. There is a common misperception that in order to gain an advantage you must throw the other person off balance and strike at their weak point. However, just as a wounded animal is a dangerous animal, a person who feels vulnerable will become more defensive, and may strike out at you in order to protect himself. If you start off with statements that emphasize his insecurity, you may win the battle, but the war is likely to continue.

Instead, help the person feel secure that you recognize his value by acknowledging that value. It is almost as if, by speaking of the positive things about this person, you bring the positive part of him to the surface. That is the part of the person whom you want to receive your feedback. You want to deal with a secure, confident person who feels safe. Such a person is less likely to defend or attack. You can have an impact upon how safe and secure this person feels when he communicates with you.

Be sincere. Yours must be a sincere expression, or it will not have value. He may perceive that you are being disingenuous in order to set him up for a fall. And if he feels this way, anything you say afterwards will be tainted with suspicion. Speak sincerely about his value, and he will more likely recognize sincere value in what you say.

Step Two: Challenge

Challenge the behavior: Describe the behavior that you want the person to change. State how this behavior is ineffective in accomplishing his job or reaching his professional goals. State also how the behavior is neither supportive to you, nor to your relationship.

Challenge the behavior, not the person. If you attack the person, he is more likely to defend and strike back. If you fight together with him against a behavior that does not benefit him, he will sooner recognize that you are on his side. Communicate the challenge in order to point out how his behavior does supports neither his goals nor yours.

Use the *Five Levels of Clear Communication* to be precise and complete, and to clearly communicate the negative consequences of his behavior.

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1. Facts | When you do . . . |
| 2. Thoughts | I think . . . |
| 3. Emotions | and I feel . . . |
| 4. Meaning/Importance | This is important to me because . . . |
| 5. Action/Expectation | I want to . . . and I want you to . . . |
- Clarify the facts: Give special attention to clarifying the facts first, before you express any opinions or judgments. Help him become aware of the specific ineffective behaviors, and the objective results of those behaviors. Those behaviors may be habitual, and he

might be totally unaware of them. If he is unaware of these facts, he will believe that your comments are irrelevant to what he knows is true. Make sure the other person understands the facts you see, even if he does not yet totally agree with you about your opinions.

- Share yourself: Let the other person know why you think the way you do, whether you have any feelings about the situation, and why it is important enough to take the risk of sharing this feedback with him. Help him understand you, not just the situation.
- Define clear action steps. Clearly and objectively define what changes you want. Don't leave him to interpret what you expect by saying, "I want you to be more sensitive," or "You should stop being so picky." The words "sensitive" and "picky" state your judgment about him, but he might disagree with that judgment. Don't argue about who is right and who is wrong. Focus instead on specific behaviors you want him to do which are not picky, or which are sensitive. It will be easier to reach an agreement.
- State positive benefit: Use the WIIFM principle, "What's in it for me?" What will the other person receive out of changing the behavior? Be sure to point out the positive benefits you expect. This increases the person's motivation to cooperate.

Step Three: Support

Understand that real change takes time: What you point out to him might be an unconscious habit. Even if he wants to change, the old habit will not automatically disappear. Give him some room to maneuver, some time to turn a good intention into a new habit.

Provide ongoing support: Because a real change will take time, you want to explore with him what you can do over time to support the change. This does not mean supporting anything the other person does. You will support behavior that contributes to a productive, effective growth and change.

But since this new behavior is not already his habit, he is likely to forget. Ask the other person how you could remind him, if you happen to see the old habit recurring. Try to identify a specific behavior you can do which he agrees will be supportive to him. When he tells you what you can do to remind him, he very subtly agrees to participate in the process of change.

Understand that real change takes persistence. Don't use the force of emotion, the force of being right, or the force of group opinion to beat him into submission. Your persistence is a much more effective force to wear down another person's resistance.

Case Study: Constructive Feedback (Resource 1993)

Mike never felt respected by his manager, Paul. Paul tended to be argumentative, while Mike tended to avoid confrontation. Eventually, Mike realized that Paul was not being disrespectful, but was just trying to stimulate creative debate. But Mike did not like the repeated interruptions. He did not need to change Paul's beliefs, but he did want to change Paul's behavior. Mike used The Feedback Sandwich to work out a new agreement with Paul. The following is an abbreviated rendition of the actual conversation that took place.

I Appreciation

Mike: Paul, you are one hundred and ten percent committed to everything you do. That's why I like working with you.

Paul: *(They discussed this "commitment" for awhile. Paul felt proud, because he is recognized for one of his best qualities.)*

II Challenge

Facts

Mike: Have you noticed that sometimes, while I am answering your questions, you have a thought and start to talk, so I shut my mouth?

Paul: Yeah, you just shut up, which just doesn't make any sense.

Thoughts

Mike: When you do this, I think you want me to listen to what you have to say. Is that what you want me to do?

Paul: Of course, but that doesn't mean you just have to shut up!

Emotions

Mike: When this happens, I feel really frustrated. Did you ever notice this?

Paul: Yeah, you just clam up. I can't get anything out of you.

Meaning/Importance

Mike: It is important that I understand what you are trying tell me. It is also important to me that you hear my input. And I simply don't know how to talk and listen at the same time.

Action/Expectation

Mike: So, I want to find a way we can both be understood without having to fight for "air time."

Step Three: Support

Mike: What can I do the next time I notice this happening again, in order to remind you so we can start communicating more effectively?

Paul: You know, Mike, I don't think this is really such a big problem.

Mike: Maybe not. But what could I do that you would feel comfortable with, next time I notice this happening again?

Paul: Well, if you hold your index finger in front of your face, I'll remember and stop talking. But you have to keep the agreement and tell me what is on your mind!

Mike: Absolutely. It's a deal.

So Mike started holding up his index finger. At first he held it for a few minutes before Paul noticed. But when Paul stopped talking, it was Mike's turn to keep the agreement. After awhile Paul noticed the finger message immediately, and eventually Mike didn't even need to hold up his finger. Mike didn't use force; he used understanding, a common goal, time, and persistence in order to support a change in the lifelong habit of another person. By first reducing resistance, Mike moved a mountain with one finger.

Balance Flexibility and Firmness

When balanced with flexibility, firmness is not rigid. When balanced with firmness, flexibility is strong. If you want your feedback to be well received, balance it with flexibility and firmness. It is possible for your feedback to have an impact, even if it is challenging, even if there is resistance. But the key to reducing the resistance is balance and timing.

Creating Supportive Agreements

The key to maintaining power is to be balanced. The key to maintaining balance is in knowing when to push and when to pull, when to assert and when to respond. It's all in the timing. In *The Book of Leadership and Strategy, Lessons of the Chinese Masters*, Thomas Cleary translates one of the oldest and most prestigious works of Taoist philosophy. These teachings list five practices of an effective leader:

“To be flexible without being pliant.

To be firm without being stiff.

To be humane without being vulnerable.

To be trusting yet impossible to deceive.

To have courage that cannot be overwhelmed.” (Cleary 1996)

The same principle of balance is true in effectively applying the techniques of The Five Levels of Communication and The Feedback Sandwich. The key is in the timing of when to firmly assert your own perceptions and expectations, and when to respond to the other person. This chapter will integrate these two models into a six-stage process for building supportive agreements.

Six basic stages are required in order to move through misunderstandings and conflicts to create supportive agreements.

The Six Stages of Creating Supportive Agreements

Stage One: You understand them

Stage Two: You acknowledge common ground

Stage Three: They understand you

Stage Four: They acknowledge common ground

Stage Five: We clarify differences

Stage Six: We create supportive agreements

Stage One: You Understand Them

If you begin by pushing your own ideas, you are likely to meet with resistance and defensiveness from another person. Instead, begin by producing in the other person a feeling of being understood. Remove his impulse to attack you or to defend himself. Remember that you want the other person to recognize and confirm that you do understand his or her point of view completely on all five levels (facts, opinions, emotions, importance, expectations). To accomplish this you can use the Five Levels of Communication as an interview technique, as presented above.

Stage Two: You Acknowledge Common Ground

Even after you have focused on understanding, it may still be premature to immediately express your own thoughts. In the martial arts, when you stand on common ground with an opponent you have leverage. So before you present your thoughts, which your opponent might resist out of habit, take a few moments to reflect on whatever he has said. See if there are any specific points to which you can agree. List these points. Let the other person know that you think these are good ideas, important points. Now the two of you are standing together on common ground looking in the same direction, rather than squaring off in battle. His resistance to your ideas will now be lessened.

The Five Levels of Communication can help you to identify and acknowledge common points. For example, even if you disagree on the solution (the action step), you can establish common ground with agreements about facts and priorities. Taking the time and effort to seek for common ground may not always be easy. You may not agree with anything he says. If this is true, then you could at least say, "Looking at it from your point of view, I can understand why you feel the way you do." If you at least give recognition to his point of view and acknowledge his emotions, you show that you are making the effort to step outside of your own position and consider his position.

Stage Three: They Understand You

Use the Feedback Sandwich with the Five Levels of Communication to help you be clear about the facts, your thoughts and emotions, what is important to you, and what you specifically want. Pause periodically, and

check to see if the other person understands. Be subtle and tactful about it. Don't say that you just want to see if he is really listening to you. You might instead say that you want to make sure you are really being clear. Ask him what he heard you say so far.

You might want the other person to focus solely on your point of view at this point, since you did that with him in Stage One. But it is more likely that he will continue to express his thoughts, opinions, and expectations. If that happens just return to stages one and two, making sure he feels understood about this new point, and commenting on the extent to which you can agree with him.

Stage Four: They Acknowledge Common Points

As you check with him to see if he understands, you can also ask him if you have made any points to which he can agree. You could begin by stating the points that have already been established in common, and then say, "So, are there any other things we've said that are common ground?" No longer a you-against-me conversation, at this point it is the two of us together.

It was earlier proposed that as much as fifty to ninety percent of conflicts and disagreements are caused by misunderstandings. Any disagreement in this category will be resolved if you have successfully completed Stages One through Four. You understand them, they understand you, and all the common ground is clarified. There is no misunderstanding. You have an agreement. ***Fifty to ninety percent of all disagreements can be resolved by following this model, without ever having to engage in a conflict.***

Stage Five: Clarify Differences

Unfortunately, most people skip Stages One through Four, and jump immediately to Stage Five. Each person tries to convince the other person to change. However, when the common ground is first acknowledged, the differences take on a new perspective. In this context, many people are more capable of resolving whatever points of disagreement still exist.

Use the Five Levels of Communication to clarify where you actually differ, and what options exist to resolve the differences. Is there a disagreement on the facts? If so, how can this be clarified to find out objectively what is true? Are there different opinions about what the facts mean? Are there different priorities? Are there different end results or goals, or merely different ways to reach the same goal? When you identify these points of disagreement you clarify what you need to work on in Stage Six, in order to create a supportive agreement.

Often disagreements are caused by common goals (Step Four – priorities) but differing solutions (Step Five – expectations). But if the goal is the same, and two different paths will get you there, what does it matter which path is taken? Actually it may be matter in principle, or because of some other priorities, and these differences are what the Five Levels of Communication can clarify, before moving on to solving the problem.

If you attempt to solve the problem before all of these stages are accomplished, you increase the risk of sabotage or resistance to the final solution. Or if you skip the understanding and acknowledgment of Stages One through Four and jump immediately to Stages Five and Six, the other person may agree with you simply to avoid conflict.

Stage Six: Create Supportive Agreements

At this stage, everyone feels understood. The common ground is established, and some agreements already exist. The facts are clear, the opinions, feelings, and priorities are out in the open. You know where you differ. There are no hidden weapons. Now is the time for problem solving. If the first five stages are completed, all participants will feel more secure that their needs are being considered.

You will want to build agreements that are supportive. A supportive agreement is one that is supportive to you and to the other person. Only when your needs and her needs are taken into account will the solution be supported in the long run. For example, in a business relationship, one party might realize, "This is a much sweeter deal for me. But, hey, it's her responsibility to look after her own interests." When the other party recognizes her misfortune, she may resist and even sabotage completion of the agreement. She may be less likely to do business with such an untrustworthy person in the future. You may win the battle, but you could lose the war.

“When leadership is established to unify the people, if the leadership is consistent, there is order, and if the leadership is inconsistent, there is disorder.” (Cleary 1996)

If you take it upon yourself to ensure that all interests are being met, you establish more trust and dependability. The result is the leverage of goodwill, a priceless asset.

Case Study: Healing Old Wounds by Creating Supportive Agreements

Dave met with his boss, Mr. S., for breakfast every morning. Their informal morning meetings included a small group who developed close professional relationships by discussing important issues and asking one

another advice. One day Mr. S. heard that someone else knew what he had shared in confidence with Dave at breakfast. Mr. S. decided that, in his position as the boss, it was not safe to discuss sensitive issues with Dave. So Mr. S. stopped attending the informal morning meetings. He didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, so he didn't say why he stopped. He was just too busy. Mr. S. also avoided Dave in the hallways and stopped talking to him in general.

This continued for four years. Before long, Dave knew something was wrong, but he didn't know what it was. The rest of the breakfast group also felt that Mr. S., the boss, was withholding, but they were not sure why. This suspicion grew into distrust, which spread through the organization like a cancer.

Eventually, both Dave and Mr. S. learned how to work with The Five Levels of Communication, the Feedback Sandwich, and the Six Stages of Creating A Supportive Agreement. They took the risk of sitting down to work out their differences. In his role as the boss, Mr. S. listened to Dave first, repeating and acknowledging until he began to reestablish some trust. Because Mr. S. was an introverted thinker, he had to work consciously at sharing his thinking process with Dave, rather than keeping it internal. Then Dave listened to Mr. S., repeating and acknowledging along the way. Dave was an extroverted thinker, so it took effort for him to pause and be silent while Mr. S. reflected. When you are weighted down by years of judgments and baggage, it is not easy to listen patiently, focusing on the other person's point of view.

After understanding each of Mr. S's points, Dave built common ground with Mr. S. by saying, "You are right, confidentiality is very important to me also. And because of this I sincerely believe that I did not discuss these things with anyone else. However, I realize that I tend to have a hot temper, and I sometimes say things I don't mean to say. So if I ever did repeat these things, I am truly sorry." Dave paused to let Mr. S. reflect for a moment, and then said, "You know, Mr. S., I wasn't the only person at the meeting when you shared that information with me. Did you ever consider that maybe someone else talked about it?"

For a moment there was silence. Then a light went off in Mr. S's mind. After four years he realized, "Maybe it was someone else who broke confidentiality, not Dave." Upon that common ground, they started building a new work relationship. ***In the end, it didn't matter who was right and who was wrong. What mattered was to rebuild trust and reestablish an effective work relationship.***

It took them time and practice to learn the techniques, and it took courage and commitment to sit down with each other and work through each step.

But can you imagine how much time and energy they had expended over four years of misunderstanding? It may seem like it takes too much time to put these principles and techniques into practice, but in truth, it saves time, energy, and a lot of grief. And it may even heal misunderstandings that have been carried for years.

Supportive Agreements Are Not Always Possible

It is not always possible to reach a supportive agreement in which everyone gets everything they want. When people's fundamental requirements are different, Covey's phrase, "Win-Win or No-Deal" is most appropriate. (Covey 1989) In such cases, no agreement is the most supportive agreement, and it is better for both parties to find other avenues for meeting their needs.

Case Study: I Thought We Had an Agreement

John and Joe had worked together for eight years as business associates. Joe wrote a book and created a video series based largely on material that John had created. John wanted to be supportive of Joe's career and at the same time receive credit for his contribution. They agreed that Joe would reference him in the video, which would also contribute to John's reputation. This would be a win/win solution for all. At least, this is what John thought they agreed to do.

Later, the producers of the show pointed out to Joe that such an acknowledgment could detract from his own credibility, so Joe did not include it in the program. When John learned that Joe had deleted his acknowledgement of John's contribution and that John's name was not mentioned on the program, John was infuriated. They used the Six Stages of Creating Supportive Agreements to try to reach a solution that would be supportive to both.

The facts were clear, the opinions were clear, the emotional reactions were clear. But they both had a fundamental disagreement about making and keeping agreements. Joe made a unilateral decision that pursuit of his own professional goals would produce more successful results for him than would collaboration with his associate. John did continue working with Joe for as long as he believed it would contribute to his own professional goals. They discussed the acknowledgment issue repeatedly. However, they eventually dissolved their business relationship because of this fundamental disagreement in belief, and the resulting lack of trust.

If John had clearly used the Five Levels of Communication and the Stages of Creating A Supportive Agreement before entering the agreement with Joe, he might have been able to clarify the misunderstanding before it began. He might not have been able to change Joe's mind or prevent him

from acting as he did. But at least John would have been more aware of their fundamental disagreements, and may have chosen not to take the risk of giving Joe access to his material.

This Technique Is Not The Holy Grail

The Stages of Creating A Supportive Agreement will not remove all conflicts or disagreements. Sometimes the differences are too great, or the conflict has progressed to the point where a higher authority is required to provide a solution. However, using this model can resolve the fifty to ninety percent of conflicts that are caused by misunderstandings, and can also build a firm foundation for resolving most differences. Even when the differences are too great, it provides a constructive method for moving through the discomfort and establishing a clear change in the relationship.

Group Dynamics

The following methods for gathering concerns facilitate all to express openly, reduce resistance to moving in a positive direction, increase individual and group responsibility, focus on productive problem solving, and give managers/leaders opportunity to reduce resistance.

Confidential Interviews

It is understandably difficult for many employees to trust that anything said to a hired consultant is actually confidential. But if such trust can be built, it provides the organization with a powerful tool, i.e., access through the consultant to hidden but potentially destructive information. Consultants who are trusted discover where the 'land mines' are buried. They learn where unresolved hurts and angers are festering that reduce employees' productivity, especially when a frustrated employee must work with people they consider to be a difficult co-workers or supervisors. This provides consultants with the opportunity to assess which upsets are based on which of these three categories of conflict: 1) a misunderstanding, 2) no misunderstanding but negotiable and 3) no misunderstanding but not negotiable.

Confidential interviews that are trusted can provide an opportunity for employees to have their concerns understood. For some people, it could be the first time they have experienced such understanding at work. Although it is often best to have upsets understood by the person directly involved, psychotherapy demonstrates that some healing is possible by addressing long standing difficulties with a professional who is not directly involved. This can be the first step in helping the person communicate more effectively with the co-worker or authority figure. The same potential for reducing emotional intensity can occur through the process of a confidential interview. But unlike counseling, where the topic is psychological, confidential interviews conducted by a qualified organizational consultant are work oriented, and thus in the realm of coaching.

Confidential interviews lay a foundation for building a rapport between an employee and a consultant. This can facilitate not only the sharing of relevant and pertinent information at critical moments within a change management process but can actually form the basis for avoiding crises. During teambuilding activities the trusting relationship that began during a confidential interview can provide the consultant with extra leverage to confront an employee in a supportive manner by encouraging them to take a risk related to the concerns they expressed.

Employees who exhibit strong resistance to a change process may begin to feel that they have an ally in the consultant who understands (not necessarily agrees

with) their concerns. Such support may help the employee reduce his or her resistance enough to allow the change process to succeed.

Anonymous Surveys

As with confidential interviews, anonymous surveys provide employees with an option for expressing their concerns without fear of retaliation. Ensuring that survey responses actually remain anonymous requires two conditions. First, the survey must be accessible over the Internet by any computer at any location, inside or outside of the organization. Secondly, responses occasionally require editing if they reflect personally identifiable information. It helps if the same organizational consultants who conducted the confidential interviews coordinate the anonymous survey.

Many employees are suspicious of the oversight organizations have on their email and are therefore apprehensive about surveys that are distributed by email, paper or pencil or even through an organizational Intranet. But if they can access the survey through computers that are not controlled by the organization, there is a greater willingness on the part of most employees to express their honest opinions and feelings.

“Fishbowl” Discussions

Often, leaders have a great deal of experience and knowledge, but employees still feel misunderstood. The leader tries to say, “I understand your needs and problems,” through a speech, newsletter, or email. A supervisor tries to say, “I passed your concerns along to the Director,” but the employees do not believe that their concerns are accurately conveyed. They do not have an experience of being understood, even if the management understands perfectly.

Of course, managers cannot take the time to go individually to each employee to listen to every concern until each person feels understood. But there is a process a leader can use that begins to shift the “group mind-set,” so that people begin to allow for the possibility that the leaders do, indeed, understand and factor our concerns into their decisions. This process uses what has been called a *Fishbowl Discussion*.

In the context of promoting understanding within an organization, a leader can use a Fishbowl discussion to help employees feel understood. Simply stated, the goal is to allow the group to hear their words coming out of their leaders mouths, without the leaders tainting the message, or arguing and criticizing it. Below is a brief description of the process, followed by a case study.

Step One: Employees communicate with immediate supervisors. Focusing on a specific change, proposal, or challenge, a group of employees (team or department) describes their concerns to their immediate supervisor. The supervisor practices being Actively Receptive, using the Three Questions, [(1) This is really important, what is it you want me to do? (2) Is there anything else? (3) Is that all?], and interviewing them using the Five Levels of Communication to pull out all relevant information. The supervisor should take notes, so that he or she can eventually repeat back all of these concerns to the group until they say, “Yes, you understand everything completely.”

One might think that this would be sufficient. But the employees are still likely to be concerned that a supervisor will not pass these concerns clearly to upper management. This is the value of the Fishbowl Discussion.

Step Two: Supervisors communicate directly to Manager. The supervisors sit in a circle with their Manager (District, Vice President, or whatever is the next highest position on the organizational chart). The supervisors task is to accurately present to the Manager all of the employees concerns, unfiltered by their own opinions. This message needs to be accomplished sincerely, not only with words, but also with tone of voice and body language. While the supervisors are sharing these messages with the Manager, all employees stand around outside of the

circle observing, listening to how accurately and completely their supervisors are able to represent their concerns.

Step Three: Manager responds to communicate understanding. The Manager's task is to verbally reflect a clear and complete understanding of the messages being shared by the Supervisors. The Manager is essentially doing with the Supervisors what the Supervisors did with the employees. The difference is that the employees are watching! At this time, the Manager is not to try to answer questions, or justify his or her actions or policies. The Manager should focus primarily on ensuring that everyone is clearly understood.

During this process, the Manager may be able to build common ground, make agreements, and even get employees to be willing to accept conditions that are not difficult. In one instance, an administrative staff at a State University complained that the college's leaders were withholding information about future plans and changes that would significantly affect their jobs. The Associate Dean of the College said, "You're right. We pass along directives that we want you to do. But it has not been the habit of this college to pass along to you our goals, objectives, and plans that will then lead to the day-to-day directives that affect your jobs. It must be very frustrating for you to work without this overall context of where we are going. This is something that we do want to change, so that we share this information with you when we know it." He then went on to describe certain restrictions that the Dean's office has in knowing, making decisions about, or communicating these objectives and plans. But by this time these comments were not seen as justifications, because he had already built a common ground of understanding and agreement. The Associate Dean reduced their resistance to trusting management. He still needed to carry forward with this promise over a period of time. But this one conversation changed the group's mind-set, and opened a possibility for more respectful relationships.

This process also allows the Supervisors to gain the trust of the employees. When the employees hear their supervisors accurately representing the concerns of the employees, and risking the Manager's reactions, they are more likely to believe that the supervisor will do this in the future when they are not watching the fishbowl.

Step Four: Follow up by the Manager. In addition to the verbal interaction that the Fishbowl Discussion provides, the Manager should also take time to reflect and prepare a response to all of the concerns expressed by the employees, letting them know what can and cannot be done to deal with them. This could be done at a later time, either verbally or in writing.

This process places the responsibility on the leaders to practice skills of understanding. But it does not require them to agree or disagree, to give in, or to make any changes they do not want to make. Authority figures do not lose their authority just by hearing the concerns of those who will implement the decisions the authority figure makes. When an authority figure provides this kind of interaction sincerely and successfully a group mind-set begins to build that management understands the employees concerns. In such an organization, employees are more likely to share these concerns constructively, rather than through passive or aggressive behaviors. This in itself will give management more information for making better decisions. It also lets management know better how to relate their *Purpose*, *Picture*, and *Plan* to the *Part* they want to motivate each employee to play. (Bridges and Mitchell's *Four P's of Transition*.)

Case Study

A national company conducted annual meetings of all local company Presidents in a region, together with the District Managers, Regional Manager and the President and CEO of the national company. These meetings provided a forum to discuss current issues, resolve commonly held concerns, and roll out new plans and initiatives.

At one such meeting the CEO was trying to stimulate enthusiasm for his new technology initiative that would integrate all individual company databases onto one common database and network. But the enthusiasm was not catching on. During one of his impassioned speeches, the consultants noticed the local company Presidents rolling eyes and holding foreheads as if to say, "Here he goes again." They looked bored, and as if they didn't want to hear any more. The consultant interrupted the CEO and said, "I know you feel so strongly about your vision and really want everyone to share in your goals. But I am curious. Do you know what these people think about your ideas?" The CEO admitted that he didn't, but that he would like to know. The consultant said, "Let's ask them."

What ensued was a Fishbowl Discussion process. The Local Presidents communicated their beliefs and concerns to their respective District Managers. The group of District Managers then passed along these beliefs and concerns to a group that consisted of the Regional Manager, and the President and the CEO of the national Company, while all the local company Presidents observed. In contrast to the CEO's presentation, all local Presidents were attentively focused, eager to hear if the CEO truly understood their concerns.

The outcome of this discussion was that whole group was in favor of the CEO's plan. They were already enthusiastic about it. They simply had specific concerns they wanted to address, and then get on with it. What

they did not want was another enthusiastic, cheerleading lecture from their boss. This came as a tremendous relief to the CEO, who was then able to address many of the concerns, and assign teams to work out the other issues. The entire process took three hours. In the past the CEO would leave one of these conferences knowing he had given the best speech he could, but not knowing whether everyone would get behind the plan. They would spend the next year trying to work through all the questions, concerns, and disagreements. This time the group walked away from the conference with a full consensus, with clear assignments for follow up, and with the satisfaction that their leader took the time to listen to them.

This is a very poignant message for all leaders. These local company Presidents were highly successful leaders in their own right. They all agreed that the most productive meeting they ever had with their leader was when he focused on understanding their concerns.

Delivering the Mail Activity

In many training classes, a trainer presents models and techniques or a list of do's and don'ts, and then leads the group through generalized role-playing scenarios that may or may not apply to their real work experience. Unfortunately, when they return to the real challenges of the workplace, many people have difficulty making a successful transition from theory to application.

This *Delivering The Mail* activity is both a training process and a work session. Not only does it facilitate practical application of communication techniques, it also allows co-workers to build agreements and resolve current, real work issues. It also establishes a method through which they can continue to work together to do this successfully.

It can be used with any group of employees who have work experience with one another. It gives groups of co-workers an opportunity to apply three of the communication models presented in this article (Five Levels of Clear Communication, Feedback Sandwich, Six Stages of Creating Supportive Agreements) to current work issues in the office.

1. Preparatory training: In a previous session, participants should be introduced to the three communication techniques.
2. Materials: Distribute 5"x8" cards, at least three to each participant.
3. Expectations: Instruct each participant to write an expectation, a request, or something a fellow staff member (or supervisor) could do that would make his or her job more effective, accomplish a necessary task, or simply make this a more enjoyable place to work. One request or expectation per card.

4. Deliver the Mail: Have participants “deliver the mail,” handing these cards to the person for whom they are intended.
5. Follow the Six Stages for Building Supportive Agreements in order to resolve these issues and build new agreements.
6. Some participants will work quickly through simple tasks. Others will address ongoing issues that have contributed to tension in their day-to-day work relationship. Significant misunderstandings may be clarified, and action steps outlined to resolve the issues.

In most organizations there is an unstated grass roots tolerance for complaining, gossiping, and passive resistance. In order to fit in, everyone does it. However, when all staff members participate in this Delivering the Mail session, the group mind-set begins to make a positive shift toward resolving issues productively. They experience an opportunity to express their concerns (CBAM), and communicate about those concerns respectfully and productively toward a positive outcome (AI).

It is especially valuable when leaders participate in this activity with employees. First, a leader's participation emphasizes how important it is to work this way with one another on a daily basis. Second, it gives employees a positive experience of working out issues with the leader in a facilitated environment. Third, it give the leader an opportunity to be a model of understanding, while working through issues that people may otherwise hesitate to bring forward.

Team Post-It-Note Problem Solving

If a people have initiated a change or have set a goal because they believe it is in their own best interests to do so, they will be more highly motivated to work through all blocks and barriers in order to succeed. But if they are dealing with a change or a goal that is imposed upon them by circumstances or by authority figures, they may have task, self, and impact concerns that could cause resistance in implementing solutions. (Schmuck, et al., 1972)

This model, proposed and used by Resource International, is a group problem solving process that is specifically designed to reduce passive or active resistance to a change or to a stated goal. The process facilitates team members to overcome inertia, develop individual initiative, and recognize the possibilities of working with others to achieve positive results. It lets the group point out to themselves that most of what we complain about is actually out of our control while what we can control, both individually and together is quite extensive. Participants are often surprised at the vast number of options this activity generates.

Post-It-Note Problem Solving Process Outline

1. Target
2. Blocks barriers, and difficulties
3. Benefits
4. Brainstorm solutions
5. Personal initiative, team cooperation
6. Action steps and assignments

Post It Note Problem Solving Process Instructions

1. Establish the Target

- This step begins to address Schmuck & Runkel's S.T.P. Model –“Target.” (Schmuck 1972)
- Set a clear target, goal, or mission. This may be a definition of a project outcome, or a statement that defines a successful solution to overcoming an existing problem. It may include a description of a change that is being considered, or that is inevitable.
- As with any goal, target, or mission, this should be stated in positive terms, and not simply a description of a problem or difficulty.

2. Blocks, barriers, and difficulties

- This step begins to address CBAM's Task, Self, and Impact Concerns. (Schmuck, et al., 1972)
- Have each person write down what people expect would be the blocks, barriers, or difficulties that will be faced in attempting to deal with the change, or to succeed at the target/goal.
 - ◆ Specifically state that participants are not only to list their own concerns, but what they have heard others express as concerns. Because some people are hesitant to be perceived as complainers, and may keep concerns to themselves, this can allow greater comfort for people to speak up.
 - ◆ Allow about 4-5 minutes for people to make these notes.
 - ◆ It may be appropriate to have quiet music in the background while people are doing this kind of reflective writing. Extended periods of silence in a group can be distracting to some.
- Put individuals together into small teams. Have each team combine everyone's input and make a list of the blocks, barriers, and difficulties. Again, some individuals are hesitant to speak up in a larger group. This allows these people to contribute more than they are likely to do in the larger group, because the team is representing their issues.
 - ◆ The leader will work as a team member in one of the teams, where he or she can make sure that his or her areas of concern are included.
- Combine the lists: Have each team report its findings to the whole group. As people are sharing, write all blocks and barriers on a flip chart. Emphasize items that are repeated.

- Define the top 4-5 categories. Have the whole group look at the combined list and condense all of these into four or five general categories of blocks, barriers, and difficulties. By this time, these categories are usually clear.
 - ◆ Create a flip chart page for each Block/Barrier to Success category. List the specific blocks, barriers, and difficulties that fit in that category.
 - ◆ Post these four or five flip charts at stations around the room.

3. **Benefits**

- This step begins to address CBAM's Impact Concerns, by allowing the group to discuss benefits to their work and to the organization as a whole. (Schmuck, et al., 1972)
- Have each person write down what he/she expects would be the benefits if we could successfully make this change or reach this target. This should include benefits to the organization, and benefits to the individual. Allow about 4 minutes for people to make these notes.
- Combine these in teams of four again. Then have each team combine its lists. Make a flip chart of these benefits as they are being presented.
- Depending on the type of issue being addressed, this step of identifying the benefits of success may be skipped. It is most useful when there is strong active or passive resistance among employees to cooperating with management in any positive direction. This step allows the group to identify that even if there are difficulties, the benefits may be worth the effort. If the group members do not see the benefits, this is good for a leader to know and find ways to educate.
 - ◆ If the group is clearly aware of the benefits but is still struggling with solutions, move directly from identifying blocks and barriers to overcoming blocks and barriers.

4. **Brainstorming solutions to overcome blocks, barriers, and difficulties**

- This step begins to address Schmuck & Runkel's S.T.P. Model – "Proposals." (Schmuck 1972)
- Give each person a stack of post it notes. Use a variety of colors.
- Give each team 4 minutes at each station to brainstorm any solutions that would help overcome the blocks, barriers, and difficulties on that list. What could be done, or what would need to be changed in order to for this to be successful?
 - ◆ Each post-it-note should include only one suggestion/solution.
 - ◆ Write clearly, legibly so that others can read.
 - ◆ Do not spend too much time on one issue. Write the idea briefly, and then move on to the next idea.
 - ◆ Do not spend all your time reading what others have written. Create your own suggestions. Repetition reinforces ideas and suggestions that are commonly held.
- Alternatively, you could just have each person circulate around the room at his or her own pace. But since it is not necessarily helpful to spend too

much time at one station, the process usually works better when facilitated as a timed team activity.

5. Identify personal initiative and team cooperation

- This step also addresses Schmuck & Runkel's S.T.P. Model – "Proposals." (Schmuck 1972)
- Assign a team to each station.
- Have that team collate the post-it-note suggestions/solutions by grouping together those that repeat or relate to one another (this will be obvious).
- Also, have them group the post-it-notes into the following three categories. They could make three vertical columns on their flip chart.
 - ◆ A: What we can do: What any individual can do without coordinating with others, without needing to get permission or support from anyone.
 - ◆ B: What we can do with support: We must coordinate with others, we must get cooperation or support or approval, possibly by submitting a proposal.)
 - ◆ C: What we cannot influence or control (the weather, the law, company policy at a level beyond this particular group, the economy and market forces, gravity!)
- Have each team present its findings to the rest of the team. Others may have additional input to add at this point.

6. Action Steps and assignments

- Initiate a discussion
 - ◆ Ask the group to notice how many things fit into Category C. Usually very few. Point out that there is a lot we can do to make this (change/goal) succeed (Category A Items), a lot we can work with others to do (Category B Items), and comparatively little that would prevent this from being successful (Category C Items).
 - ◆ Review the benefits. Review the solutions we have outlined to overcome the blocks and barriers. Do we think the benefits are worth the effort it will take? Are there enough steps we can take to make it worth achieving the benefits? Is there anything else we can do that would help us to reach those benefits?
- Who will do what?
 - ◆ Assign Category A solutions. Since all the items on this list have been identified as what any individual could take initiative to do, allow individuals to volunteer and identify at least one or two items that they take personal responsibility to do.
 - ◆ Set time lines for action steps, and for reporting back.
 - ◆ Assign teams or individuals to prepare proposals, plans for Category B: getting help, support, approval from others. Assign time lines for action steps and reporting back.

- ◆ **Summarize the decisions and action steps** that have been made, and be sure everyone is clear on follow up action steps, and dates for reporting back on progress.

Additional problem solving methods or team decision-making models may be applied at various stages of this process. The overall goal is to allow the group to recognize that there is always something they can do to move in a positive direction, and that this is more productive than complaining. Management could point out this simple truth, but such motivational speeches may be met with suspicion. This activity facilitates the group to point it out to it's own members, allowing them to overcome their inertia and resistance to change. This can create a positive momentum of peer pressure that could make it difficult for individual employees to resist or sabotage.

Follow up by Management/Leadership

To maintain the positive momentum generated from this activity, it is essential that management respond to what the employees have generated as suggestions and possibilities for improvement. It is not necessary to agree or accede as if everything were a demand. Remember – the key to reducing resistance is not agreement, it is understanding.

In a “Fishbowl” meeting, a skilled leader can use face-to-face communication to express a sincere interest in the concerns of the employees. Too often employees may think, “I tell my concerns to my supervisor, but who knows what information she really passes up the ladder.” It is especially powerful for employees to actually hear their supervisors representing the employees concerns directly to the division managers, or for the division managers representing these concerns to the President or CEO. In response, the leader should essentially complete Stages One and Two of the Six Stages of Building Supportive Agreements. This would include

1. Repeat these concerns back to the supervisors so that everyone hears that they she got it.
2. Confirm the points with which she agrees. (*That's a valid concern, or This is a high priority, or That is a plan we can set in motion.*)
3. Address CBAM concerns for impact. (*You're concerned that the new system may slow our customer response time. It's to be expected may take more time at first. If response times do not reduce by the end of the first month we will have to make adjustments.*)
4. Address CBAM concerns for self. (*I realize that the changes require more effort from you, and I am grateful that your hard work will keep us moving ahead in these difficult times.*)
5. Point out those issues that are beyond her control. (*Economic forces, legal considerations, instructions from the Board, ongoing negotiations.*)
6. Point out which items will take more time to respond. Let them know how and when she will get back to them on these concerns. (*I'll work with the*

Wellness Committee and get back to you in two weeks with a list of steps we can take.) Of course, then it is essential to get back to them within that period of time.

If it is not possible to do a “Fishbowl Session” with the group, then respond in writing to their written reports, addressing as many of the abovementioned points as possible.

Case Study: Post It Note Problem Solving

The Dean of a College included this Post-It-Note Problem Solving process in a staff development training, along with other techniques for resolving misunderstandings and disagreements. Prior to the training, an online anonymous survey allowed the staff to identify high priority issues (Step 1) and to create the categories of blocks, barriers, and difficulties (Step 2) about upcoming changes. These included:

1. Communication problems
2. Petty politics
3. Underutilized and unrecognized staff
4. Lack of training and preparation for jobs
5. Upcoming change of Dean

Flip chart workstations were established around the room. Each team added to each flip chart station by listing specific issues within that area that needed attention. Then the teams followed the process to complete brainstorming solutions, and assign individual-initiative and team-cooperative assignments.

Each team then presented a verbal summary of the challenges, concerns, recommendations and responsibilities defined within the topic area to which they were assigned. This was presented to the entire group and to the Associate Dean. The Associate Dean’s responses were refreshingly candid, which facilitated an atmosphere of trust in which staff could express themselves more openly and honestly. He surprised many staff members with his understanding and sincere compassion for the changes and challenges they have to deal with that are beyond their control. His comments were pragmatic and reasonable about what could be accomplished and what needed further information and consideration.

Each team chose one task to follow up on and report back to the group with their progress. As a result of this discussion, one group suggested that the staff request permission to work with the faculty in sending a recommendation for Interim Dean to the Provost. The faculty encouraged the staff to present its own recommendation, which had never been done at the University, which was received by the Provost and considered in the decision making process.

In a follow up memo, one staff member stated,

“Yesterday was a great day, in my opinion, giving us all some tools for making our environment a better place every single day. I used to work in Residential Life for years, and was in weeks and weeks of training every year. I facilitated quite a bit of training for student staff, as well. And I have to tell you both that yours was the best training seminar I've ever been to. It was useful without being fluffy. It built on real work scenarios and emotions. We are often taught that it is bad to mix emotion and work, so it was good to see a training that discussed emotion as a REAL piece of everything we do and taught us how to understand it in the context of the workplace.”

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