ARMY360
Coaching Newsletter

Why Are Leaders Resistant to Coaching?

When you are providing coaching or feedback, it is not uncommon to face resistance from those individuals on the receiving end. Understanding the sources of resistance can be helpful for a coach because through questions and observations, the coach can help the leader discover their own sources of resistance, and move past them to facilitate progress. The following are some common sources of resistance:

- **Fear of the unknown.** Change implies uncertainty and uncertainty can be uncomfortable. Not knowing what may happen in the future can lead to heightened anxiety and unwillingness to be open to new ideas and approaches.
- **Fear of failure.** A leader may be uncomfortable when a new skill is required that goes beyond his or her current approach to the work, expectations of the work, or capabilities. He or she may fear being unable to meet their own expectations, or the expectations of others.
- **Disagreement with the need to change.** If the leader does not perceive a need for change, then they have little motivation to listen to the message of the coach and do the difficult work of changing behavior or learning new skills.
- **Loss of something of value.** A leader may want to know how the change will affect his or her role, job functions, or behaviors (i.e., "what's in it for me?). If a leader believes he or she will wind up losing something as a result of the change, he or she may resist.
- **Leaving the "comfort zone."** It is natural not to want to take a risk or to want put things off that are unknown or untested. A leader may want to stay in his or her comfort zone.
- **Misunderstanding and lack of trust.** A leader may not understand a change's implications or may perceive that it might create more problems than gains. These situations often occur when trust is lacking between the individual leading the change and his or her subordinates.
- **Inertia.** Change requires effort, oftentimes, a significant effort. Watch out for burnout and do not underestimate the effects of fatigue on subordinates.

Ask the Expert: What are some approaches to building on leaders' strengths in coaching?

As a challenge to our readers, submit your feedback to the above posed question and your answer may be featured in our next coaching newsletter. Send an email with your response to Heidi Keller-Glaze, Ph.D. at hkeller-glaze@icfi.com .While all responses may not be featured in the next coaching newsletter, we will try to highlight as many of your ideas as possible. Please also indicate in your email whether you would like to remain anonymous.

In this Issue

Why Are Leaders Resistant?
- An overview of the potential reasons for resistance to coaching and feedback.

Feedback, and the Use of Techniques to Overcome Resistance
- Feedback defined, and techniques that can be used to overcome resistance.

Ask the Expert: Dealing With a Resistant Leader
- Challenges coming from MSAF coaches posed to our coaching experts! Case studies of common scenarios followed by an in-depth analysis.

Exercises to Improve Your Coaching
- Practical exercises on how to improve your coaching when resistance gets in the way.

Feedback and the Use of Powerful Questioning to Overcome Resistance

Feedback can be defined as information about past behavior, delivered in the present, which may influence future behavior [1]. In order to adapt to the changing operational environment, Soldiers and leaders need information about how they performed in the past in order to improve their performance in the future. During the feedback process, the coach should raise specific issues based on the data through powerful questioning.

Technique to Try: Powerful Questioning.

Ask the leader to explain any discrepancies between how he or she perceives areas of strength or opportunities for development, and how others perceive his or her strengths and needs for improvement. You might say, "Based on the feedback data, it appears that your subordinates see you as avoiding conflict. I am curious about how you see your ability to handle conflict."

The fact that the message of feedback can sometimes pose a challenge to engrained self-views (see "Why are Leaders Resistant to Coaching?" on page 1 for more detail) means that individuals may resist feedback.

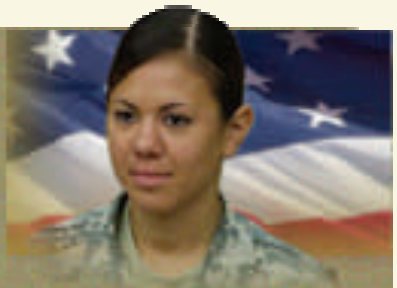
Technique to Try: Shift the Focus from the Leader to the Mission.

Take the focus off of the resistant leader and direct it to the mission. Ask, "What do we need to achieve here?" and "What will that take from you and the unit?" Use responses to move towards a discussion of what the leader needs to do more of, do differently, or improve upon. Then ask what it will take for them to do that.

Note that what sometimes may look like resistance might have an alternate explanation, such as the leader's need to step away and digest the feedback. While the leader may appear to be shutting down or not listening, he or she may have heard the feedback and now needs time to process and think about the feedback on his or her own.

Technique to Try: Identify When Processing is Disguised as Resistance

Determine whether the individual being coached just needs time to process the information. Ask, "So what did you get from what I just said? What are your next steps? What can we hope to see as a result of this conversation?" and "What do you need from me to support next steps?"



Learn More: Resources on Resistance

Virtual Improvement Center

The Virtual Improvement Center (VIC) is available as a resource for leader development on the MSAF website. The VIC offers numerous developmental activities including readings, exercises, and simulations organized by the Core Leader Competencies to make it easy to search by developmental need. This is an excellent resource for leaders to develop knowledge and skills. Coaches should be familiar with the VIC in order to appropriately recommend it to leaders.

Want to Know More About Coaching?

Check out the following resources:

[1]*What did you say? The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback.* By: Charles N. Seashore, Edith Whitfield Seashore, and Gerald M. Weinberg. Bingham House Books, 2004.

The Power of Feedback: 35 Principles for Turning Feedback from Others into Personal and Professional Change. By: Joseph R. Folkman. John Wiley and Sons, 2006.

Resistance to Change: A Guide to Harvesting its Positive Power. By: T. Harvey. Roman and Littlefield Education, 2010.

Immunity to Change. By: Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey. Harvard Business School Publishing Corp., 2009.

Heart of Change: Real Life Stories of How People Change Their Organizations. By: John *P.* Kotter and Deloitte Consulting, LLC., 2002.

Ask the Expert: Dealing With a Resistant Leader

In this edition of "Ask the Expert," senior leaders and MSAF coaches expressed interest in learning more about techniques for dealing with resistance. The following are some challenges and scenarios they provided.

"When I try to provide my subordinate with feedback, he always says the same thing, 'I tried to do that, but I don't have the time or resources to work on it.' It seems like something else is always to blame. What techniques should I use to avoid his excuses?"

MAJ Davis requests to hold an after action review (AAR) with 2LT Baker to discuss the 2LT's recent assignment as platoon leader. Things hadn't gone as expected and there have been discipline problems in the unit over the past few months.

2LT Baker immediately makes excuses, noting that he has tried to correct the behavior of his subordinates, but that they are simply not wiling or able to do what is required.

MAJ Davis responds, "It is definitely a challenge when subordinates seem unwilling to change their behavior. Where might you have some influence on this situation? What can you improve or try that you haven't done yet?"

2LT Baker notes that he can try speaking with each of his subordinates about the circumstances including those individuals who were disciplined. MAJ Davis and 2LT Baker then go on to develop a sequence of steps to improve the behavior in the LT's unit.

Resistance to a Coaching Conversation: Issue is Outside Sphere of Influence

- Determine how capable and willing the leader is to own a part of the situation. If he or she believes that the blame and solution reside outside of his or her sphere of control or influence, then feedback and coaching may not help.
- If the leader is open to identifying where there might be some, even if only a little, influence or control to improve the situation, you may want to help to define what steps and action might look like.
- Ask what would happen if the leader did nothing about this as a way to transition him or her from resistance to action.

"Every time I try to discuss an issue with a subordinate, she says it is under control and not to worry about it. As a result, we never have a discussion about her performance. What can I do?"

SGT Evans provides PFC James with feedback on her ability to develop others within her squad. SGT Evans begins to discuss strategies that she can use to improve her abilities.

"There are a couple of great strategies to provide your squad with ongoing development. You may want to try providing your Soldiers regular feedback and identify developmental opportunities for them such as additional training opportunities, as well as mentoring or coaching."

PFC James responds, "Thanks for your guidance. I've actually already been hosting bi-weekly discussions ."

SGT Evans acknowledges that this is a great strategy and follows up with a more specific question, "Maybe we could discuss some more specifics to ensure your squad members are translating what you tell them into actionable next steps."

SGT Evans and PFC James begin to discuss strategies that will make for stronger meetings with her unit.

Resistance to a Coaching Conversation: Issue is Under Control

- Identify with the leader what needs to be accomplished to achieve the desired goals and improvements
- Determine what actions the leader is taking and explore how these actions might lead to the desired end state.
- Ask specific questions such as, "How might you build on, or otherwise change what you are already doing to get at the results you need to see?"
- Ask the leader how he or she will know his or her actions or plan has been successful.

Exercises to Improve Your Coaching

Read through the following list of coaching myths and facts about feedback. How often do you find yourself falling for the same traps? Try the following exercises and use the space provided below to track your progress.

Exercise 1:

Myth: The content of a message is more important than the way the message is delivered.

Fact: The packaging of a message (e.g., tone, volume, etc.) are often the first things people hear and attend to. If perceived as having too much force, the receiver may dismiss the feedback as illegitimate or unfair.

Practice: *Over the next few days, try to notice how both yourself and others communicate and respond to messages. Listen to the tone of voice, nonverbal cues, and body language beyond content. What do you notice? Are there times when people respond to your comments in ways you did not expect? What else might you have been communicating in your tone of voice or body language?*

Exercise 2:

Myth: If the coach delivers feedback in just the right way, it should be accepted as given.

Fact: If the leader being coached doesn't want your feedback, you'll never succeed in reaching them.

Practice: *Check in after you have given feedback to see how it was translated into action steps. Practice asking questions such as: So given this conversation, what will you do? What will enable you to do that? What might get in the way? How will you know you are successful? These questions help you to get a sense of what the leader heard, what he or she will do, and how serious he or she is about action.*

Exercise 3:

Myth: Resistance to coaching or feedback is a sign that the leader is not ready or open to assistance.

Fact: Assuming that resistance means "no," can get in the way of potential breakthrough interactions. The coach should try to help the individual understand that asking for assistance and feedback is a sign of strength and commitment—not weakness or failure.

Practice: If *you, as the coach, are also the leader for the individual's squad, team, etc., work to build a culture of feedback by leading by example (ask for feedback ,and receive it well yourself). Remember to ask for specific feedback and demonstrate that you take input seriously. If you notice you become resistant, note when the resistance happens and what that tells you about your own fears and concerns.*

Participation in Army MSAF is required by AR 350-1, Appendix K for all Army leaders and units. Leaders who participate in MSAF benefit from new insights into their strengths and capabilities, and their weaknesses. Use of resources associated with the MSAF program, such as coaching and the Virtual Improvement Center (described on page 2), allow leaders to build upon strengths and improve areas of need.

For more information about MSAF coaching, please contact:
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