

MANAGING RESISTANCE

Introduction

Resistance is a common element in various forms of professional communication due to the differences that can exist between conversational partners in terms of vision, goals, positions, etcetera.

Avoiding or denying resistance within a relationship often has a counterproductive effect and can even increase resistance. This also applies to the choice of confrontation in the sense of blaming. In practice, it can happen, for example, that a party has not fulfilled the agreements made. It demonstrates a professional attitude if the HRM professional views this "non-compliance with agreements" as a signal and behaviour to be investigated, rather than an act of sabotage directed against them. In other words, emotionally reacting to the conversational partner in such a case is a subjective and unprofessional response. The relationship between the conversational partner and the HRM professional, no matter how pleasant and desired a good atmosphere may be, is functionally businesslike. When, after analyzing the causes/reasons for this behaviour, the relationship can no longer be considered a workable one according to HRM professional standards, contact with the conversational partner should be terminated.

Dealing with resistance in a meaningful, effective way requires specific skills, including reflective skills and communication at a metalevel.

Encountering resistance can also evoke feelings in the receiver. First, six of the most common causes of resistance are provided, along with a brief explanatory note. Knowledge of these causes can help professionals prevent or neutralize resistance. Then, three conditions are described that can help deal with resistance.

Aspects of Resistance

1. *Unwillingness*: The conversational partner may lack commitment to the product goal or the agreements made. The conversational partner may not want something or want something different, or may not want to change or bring about a change in their (problem) situation. There may be doubt on the conversational partner's part regarding their abilities and/or the ability to achieve results. They may also temporarily lack physical and/or mental energy. Or they may have an inability to detach themselves from the situation, while simultaneously being convinced of the correctness of their analysis, vision, or approach.
2. *Circumstances*: For example, developments in the conversational partners' situation may have made it impossible for them to fulfil the agreements. Or there may be changes in the (problem) situation that no longer require (certain) actions.
3. *Lack of clarity*: Despite the effort to clarify when making agreements, it may happen that these were not entirely clear to (one of) the parties afterwards.

4. *Dissatisfaction*: The conversational partner may not agree with the way goals are to be achieved. They may feel "misunderstood," leading them to refuse to cooperate with something.
5. *Judgement*: The conversational partner may struggle to accept help because receiving help signifies weakness. They may also resist based on previous experiences with the system that the professional represents.
6. *Incompetence*: The conversational partner may lack the competence to perform a task/assignment. Resistance and unwillingness arise due to this inability.

Dealing with Resistance

Resistance is primarily a signal that indicates issues that are important to the conversational partner. Resistance can manifest in various forms of behaviour, such as silence, hostility, defensive behaviour, avoidance, and even in the form of excessive enthusiasm. Recognizing these signals is the first step in dealing with resistance.

It should be noted that these forms of behaviour do not necessarily always indicate resistance. For instance, a silent conversational partner may indicate shyness or uncertainty as much as resistance.

Resistance demands serious attention from professionals. Allowing resistance to persist typically results in ineffective communication between the professional and the conversational partner because they are not aligned in their perspectives. This can have various negative consequences. There's a risk that the conversational partner withholds certain information that is important for a comprehensive and accurate understanding of their problem situation. Another negative consequence can be that, especially in making choices regarding goals and work agreements, there is no commitment from the conversational partner. Naming and addressing resistance in the conversational partner is thus essential with the aim of reducing or eliminating it.

Based on the views of Bezanson, Decaf, and Stewart (1982), the three areas of focus that can assist the professional in dealing with resistance are:

1. Creating conditions of safety and clarity.
2. Creating motivating conditions.
3. Applying specific communication techniques.

1. Creating Conditions of Safety and Clarity

Preventing resistance in the conversational partner is more effective than trying to address it later. In terms of preventing resistance, the conversational partner must be involved from the beginning of the contact in determining the goal and exploring possible solutions to problems. The conversational partner may be apprehensive that their situation might undergo significant changes. They should not feel that they are expected to take (too) big steps. Based on their assessment of the conversational partner's capabilities, the professional should propose realistic

and achievable goals. The professional can also ask the conversational partner to express their expectations and wishes as well as their perceived possibilities. This involves providing a certain basis for safety.

Regarding creating clarity, the professional should, in the initial phase of the contact, clarify as soon as possible what the purpose of the contact is and explicitly address mutual expectations. They should also indicate their (preferred) role and make agreements with the conversational partner. Additionally, the professional should explain their approach, the steps involved, and broadly what information they need from the conversational partner.

2. Creating Motivating Conditions

As mentioned earlier, resistance in a conversational partner can be due to a reluctance to seek help for a problem. This is not only understandable but can also be a healthy sign. Such resistance may indicate the conversational partner's need to have control over their own life, make decisions independently, and solve their problem themselves. Suspicion of the professional can also be seen as healthy and positive in this context. It can be motivating if the professional, in explaining the resistance, succeeds in respecting and encouraging the conversational partner's need for autonomy as much as possible. This can be achieved by choosing an approach (role) that best allows the conversational partner's need to shine through. In this case, the role of a coach would ideally be suitable. However, it should be noted that the conversational partner's need for self-determination is not always in line with their mental and physical capabilities. In some cases, a combination of roles, such as coach and expert, may be more appropriate. Essentially, the goal is to motivate the conversational partner to actively work on their problem or question.

3. Applying Specific Communication Techniques

To address resistance, an essential conversational skill is the ability to have a "meta dialogue," or a conversation about the conversation itself. In a meta dialogue, the professional shifts away from the original topic of conversation and essentially starts a "conversation about the conversation."

Although the original topic of the conversation takes a back seat, it remains the reference point for the meta-dialogue. The reason for the observed resistance can have everything to do with the content and how the original topic was discussed. In terms of communication, it's crucial to engage in metacommunication at the relational level, listen, and refrain from responding with counterarguments. It usually backfires if the professional defends themselves or presents counterarguments. In the context of resistance in the conversational partner, communication at the content level is irrelevant. Ears and minds are, in a sense, clogged.

Step-by-Step Plan for Addressing Resistance

Adapted from Van der Molen, Kluytmans, and Kramer (1995), here is an example of a step-by-step plan for addressing resistance with the conversation partner:

1. *Paraphrase*: Begin by restating in your own words the last thing the conversation partner said.
2. *Metacommunication*: Identify and discuss the resistance you observe in the behaviour of the conversation partner, and check this with them.
3. *What Doesn't the Conversation Partner Want*: Inquire about and discuss the cause or reason behind their behaviour.
4. *What Does the Conversation Partner Want*: Ask about what the conversation partner would like or expect.
5. *Summarize and Respond*: Summarize what the conversation partner has expressed and provide your (meta)response to improve mutual communication, all while keeping in mind your professional task of guiding the conversation partner towards the desired situation.
6. *Make Agreements*: Establish agreements with the conversation partner regarding the elimination or prevention of such resistance. Depending on the cause of the resistance, goals, actions, approach, etc., can be revised.
7. *Return to the Substantive Conversation*: With the agreements in mind, return to the original topic of the conversation.

This plan can be useful in addressing resistance in various contexts and improving communication between parties.