

Dealing with Resistances

Aims:

To understand the nature and forms of resistance to training which might be encountered during a course

To be able to identify when resistance to training is occurring

To develop confidence in challenging resistances to training successfully

Resources required:

Training room and small group space; flipchart, OHP, pens, etc.

- 3.1 'Forms of resistance' OHP transparency and handout
 - 3.2 'Two reasons for resistance to training' OHP transparency and handout
 - 3.3 'Techniques for dealing with resistance' OHP transparency and handout
 - 4.1 'Dealing with Resistance Situations' exercise cards
- 'Learning log' sheets

1 Background notes



Resistance to training is natural. After all, training is about change and development, and most of us are opposed at different times to anything which changes the things we have become accustomed to. In training courses, resistance can be particularly marked, particularly if participants are less motivated or feel personally threatened by the subject matter. Because resistance to training is natural, the trainer needs to be aware of the different forms which it can take, understand the underlying causes of resistance, and be prepared to deal with it constructively.

Resistance can take many forms. The examples used in 3.1 are a few of those most commonly encountered by trainers where they will have to consider if they want to take any action. The following notes give more detail about each type of resistance:

Outright refusal

This is perhaps the most obvious form of resistance. Someone enrolled in the course chooses not to take part in an exercise or discussion. In the extreme case, the refuser walks out or leaves the course early (and this can be very effective in making the trainer feel guilty if no reason is offered). The reasons can be many and may not always reflect a hostile resistance. More acceptable refusals might include: feeling unwell, not fully understanding the process, being wary of having to do something in front of

colleagues or friends. More hostile refusals may indicate: a lack of motivation to undertake this training event, dislike of others on the course, or a challenge to the authority of the trainer.

Do-it-to-me

This is a more subtle form of refusal and occurs where a participant either remains silent for long periods of the course, or continually opts out of engagement in an exercise. This can appear as an attitude of watching and observing rather than participating. Again the trainer needs to check whether the participant is inhibited, inadequately prepared, or resisting.

Headstuff only

On some experientially-based courses, a participant may revert to analysing and intellectualising the content rather than engaging in the practical material. Such a person is engaging in headstuff rather than feelings and experience. This may be a consequence of his past approach to learning but it may also signify a resistance to engaging fully with the course material.

Sabotaging the course

There are as many forms of sabotage as there are saboteurs! Some of their techniques are more effective than others. Amongst those we have encountered are: deliberately arriving late for each session; giving a running commentary in whispers to a colleague throughout the course; asking 'red herring' questions which engage the trainer or group but divert the subject; continually asking for more instructions; deliberately not doing advance preparation work for the course. Sometimes, saboteurs operate alone; other times they succeed in building a little clique. Most trainers quickly get to sense a saboteur.

Breaking groundrules

This is a specific form of sabotage in that someone deliberately sets out to create a disturbance by breaking one of the course rules which he or she has been party to making. It is normally guaranteed to raise anxieties, especially if the rule broken refers to one of the more sensitive issues such as confidentiality or the way in which criticism is offered.

Not following instructions

This is another specific form of sabotage. Some saboteurs will demonstrate resistance by quite obviously not following the instructions for an exercise, or by repeatedly asking for clarification. After correcting and explaining one or two times, the trainer should interpret the third occurrence as a resistance to the exercise.

Personal attack

In order to avoid an issue, some participants will undermine the trainer by using personal references. This

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technique is clever, since few of us can successfully resist the opportunity to defend or explain ourselves.

Comments such as 'Do you have experience of that yourself?', 'How can anyone reasonably expect us to do that?', 'Your practice must be pretty poor if you allow a situation like that to develop' or 'I don't believe you', if expressed in the right context, are all likely to put the trainer on the defensive. This gives the participant control of the situation. Note how often when this occurs the participant seeks allies from amongst other participants with phrases such as 'We all agree'.

Denying the validity

This particular form of personal attack is used to undermine the trainer by suggesting that what is being proposed is irrelevant or inapplicable to the situation that the participants are in. Warning phrases include: 'You don't understand our situation'; 'Your examples wouldn't work in our set-up'; and comments beginning 'Yes ... but' where the second half of the phrase denies the applicability of the first.

Story capping

This is a technique used by a few people to maintain attention on themselves whilst diverting attention from the point at issue. In response to an example or situation explained by one participant, the resisting participant jumps in with his example seeking to outscore the first. The contribution frequently sounds like 'If you think that was bad, let me tell you about a real disaster I once had...'. Invariably, such story caps are exaggerated and detract from the chance of other participants learning from the issue first raised.

You may want to ask participants for other forms of resistance they have encountered in training.

Whatever form the resistance takes, the trainer has to be able to both identify it and start to understand the reasons for it.

The skill in being able to identify resistance grows with experience in the training role, though it can often be helpful to have a co-trainer either to compare notes with, or to use in an 'observer' role to check out what is happening during the course.

All resistance stems from some underlying anxiety or concern of the participant. In general, this concern will conform to one of two patterns (3.2) and either pattern could explain each of the forms of resistance provided as examples earlier. The two patterns are:

1 A need to assert the participant's strength

Here the resistor is determined to maintain some control over the situation. By challenging the trainer, he demonstrates his own authority. The participant is able to exercise control by introducing his own agenda into the training course through resistance. He is seen as

impervious to the actions of the trainer, and by implication, a more competent person.

2 A need to protect the participant's weakness

Here the resistor is concerned to protect himself, by restricting the chance of any of his weaknesses being exposed. He regards himself as potentially vulnerable – perhaps to criticism or ridicule – and is determined to avoid any such exposure.

If the trainer understands the cause of the resistance, she is in a better position to deal with it.

Where the resistance is concerned to assert the control of the participant the trainer will need to:

- make the training non-competitive
- allow all participants to add to the agenda
- value the experience of the participant

whilst also recognising that at times, this participant may not be as strong as he would outwardly appear.

Where the resistance is concerned to protect the weakness of the participant, the trainer will need to:

- build adequate safeguards to satisfy all participants
- allow opportunities for pair or trio working, rather than whole group sessions
- value the experience of the participant.

Much has been written about resistance, but the fundamentals of dealing with it are relatively simple. In his book, *Flawless Consulting*, Peter Block advocates a simple three-stage technique to be used when resistance is encountered. We have used, extended and adapted this technique and placed it in a training context (3.3).

1 Identify what form the resistance is taking

As the trainer, you need to be alert to what is happening at all times during the course. This involves using most of the trainer's natural senses including seeing, listening and 'feeling'.

- seeing resistance – notice when someone is not participating, sitting back, arriving late, not paying attention, or distracting others;
- listening to resistance – keep your ears alert to muttered comments, direct challenges, hostile comments in small groups - and their opposites - unnatural periods of silence;
- 'feeling' resistance – often the most telling sense, but also the most difficult to describe: with experience, many trainers will detect resistance intuitively and be prepared to take the risk of pointing it out to a participant.