Working With Resistance and Encouraging Buy-In to New Programs

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Abstract

In order to best meet the needs of older residents in long-term care settings, clinicians often develop programs designed to streamline and improve care. However, many individuals are reluctant to embrace change. This article will discuss strategies that the speech-language pathologist (SLP) can use to assess and address the source of resistance to new programs and thereby facilitate optimal outcomes.

Many clinicians have great ideas for new programs that are not always well received by others, including managers and staff. You try to be clearer and more articulate in how you present program goals; you argue for ways the program can enrich the lives of elders; you offer good ideas for how to make it work; and, yet, you still encounter negativity and resistance. Even when they are accepted, new programs often encounter roadblocks to implementation, particularly when they require communication and collaboration across disciplines.

Many factors, including limited time and resources, make it difficult to engage others in work beyond what their jobs require. When we try to get people’s attention, most of us highlight the problems that the proposed project will address. This is the norm in long-term care settings, where we tend to focus on deficits (i.e., what is wrong, missing, problematic, or broken that we need to correct, solve, or fix).

However, we rarely inspire energy or passion for engagement by talking about what is wrong. Rather, we generate excitement and commitment by talking about what is possible, presenting a picture of what could be—an ideal others can gravitate toward. As a coach and organizational consultant, I talk to people who work in long-term care settings, from executives to clinicians to direct-care staff. When I ask them to describe when they feel most energized, excited, or hopeful about their work with others on programs or projects, virtually all mention three factors or conditions:

- When they know that what they do makes a difference
- When they have a clear understanding of the purpose of the work
- When they feel competent—that their contribution is useful and valued

No matter what our role, we want to know that our time will be well spent, that what we do is meaningful, and that what we say matters—that our voices will be heard.
Resistance to Change

One of the most powerful ways to motivate others is to honor their resistance. When people push back against something, they are also pulling toward something they care about. If you find out what that is, you will know how to get and keep them engaged. Strangely enough, people’s interest and investment increase when we invite and welcome their resistance, rather than try to figure out ways to minimize or work around it.

Consider the case of Sally, the relatively new Director of Rehabilitation in a 350-bed nursing home. She loves the residents and generally gets along with their family members; however, she struggles with members of her staff and peers in other disciplines who, she believes, do not have the heart for the work. When she suggests a change in procedure, staff tell her why her suggestion has not worked before and will not now, or they agree to try it, but continue to do things in exactly the same way they have been. She feels frustrated because she believes her ideas will address problems, but no one seems receptive to change.

In such situations, most of us feel frustrated like Sally does. In our personal and professional pursuits, we all sometimes want others to change (e.g., our spouse to remember to pick up the laundry, our child to stop leaving clothes on the bedroom floor, our coworker to observe deadlines and keep up with paperwork). We tell them the behavior is annoying or unacceptable; we ask them to stop, start, or do something different. Whatever we are doing to make them change is not working. So, why do people repeat behaviors that do not appear to be in their best interests?

We all have some problems with change. Some people are resistant to any and all change; some can manage change, with sufficient advance notice and explanation; others love change in general, but object to a specific change. Most of us have something that we hold onto—that we believe we cannot change, even when there are good reasons to do so.

So, how do we change when we really need to, and how do we get people in our organizations to embrace change, new programs, or approaches when it is imperative that they do so?

Approaches to Change

Everyone needs motivation to do things in new and different ways. The most common forms of motivation are external; we need a push from outside of ourselves to make a change. That push can be a small nudge (“I would really like you to be on this committee”), a bigger push (“You need to work with the committee to stay current in your role”), or the final shove (“If you don’t do this, you will be on the way out”). This familiar approach can work, and sometimes a gentle or more urgent kick in the pants is exactly what we, or someone who reports to us, need to “get with the program.” More often than not, however, the kind of compliance that comes with this approach is short-lived. They—or we—still don’t understand or accept the need to change, and, ultimately, some form of resistance manifests itself somewhere down the line.

The PHI Coaching Approach (2011) is designed to support organizations in shifting the ways people work and communicate. Key to the PHI Approach is the idea that people are most likely to change when presented with a genuine choice and when they have the capacity to act on that choice. When people feel that change is forced upon them, they naturally resist. From their point of view, resistance makes sense and may seem to be the only viable option. Insisting that they change tends to reinforce and strengthen their resistance. Paradoxically, it is when we stop pushing people to change that they are most likely to make their own shifts. This happens when a manager or peer puts aside his/her own agenda and shows a sincere interest in the resistant person’s perspective.

In any effort to make organizational changes or introduce new programmatic approaches, there will be staff at all levels who embrace the change, those who resist,
others whose reaction falls somewhere in between. Changing the way people do their work is often imperative. Managers use the coaching approach to persuade staff who are reluctant or resistant; in most cases, staff choose to make the necessary shifts. Key to this approach is listening: When managers stop trying to change staff and start listening, “resistant” individuals often move toward the desired change.

Often, when we have good ideas that others resist, we form judgments about them that prevent us from engaging. In Sally’s case, there could be many reasons for staff resistance. They may not understand how Sally’s suggestions can improve the work environment. They may believe their ideas will be more effective than hers. They may like what she is proposing but fear they don’t have the skills, experience, or capacity to do it well. They may resist simply because Sally is new or because they don’t like her. Sally might say resistant staff are jaded and don’t care enough patients. If, instead of making that assumption, she shows genuine interest in her coworkers’ perspectives, then she is ready to welcome their resistance and encourage their active engagement in shaping and implementing the program.

**Levels of Resistance**

All resistance is not the same. In order to work effectively with others’ resistance to change, new ideas, or programs, we need to understand, and identify appropriate responses to, different kinds and levels of resistance.

**Level One: “I Don't Get It”**

There are some who don’t immediately embrace Sally’s ideas because they don’t fully understand what she is proposing. They are operating at Level One Resistance, also described as the Information-Based Level (Maurer, 2010). For these individuals, it helps to find out what aspects are unclear and offer more information. Chances are that the combination of showing interest in their questions and providing some clarification will help them accept and implement necessary changes.

At this level, the resistance and the response to it are fairly straightforward. The problem comes when clinicians and others trying to generate interest in new programs treat all resistance as if it were Level One. When we sense that people are not with us, we tend to keep offering more information. Data, evidence, facts, and rational argument will work with Level One Resistance, but are ineffective in addressing any other kind.

**Level Two: “I Don't Like It”**

In organizations, most resistance is at Level Two, also known as the Physical/Emotional Level (Maurer, 2010). Even when the status quo is virtually intolerable, change can provoke a negative emotional response. Often there is some fear involved; resistant staff may simply fear change, or fear they will fail, lose status, or be overworked. They may worry that results of the change will not meet their expectations. Level Two characterizes the behavior of most of the people Sally has approached about her programmatic ideas. For example, some worry that what she is suggesting will require skills they don’t have (i.e., they won’t be able to do their jobs). Because of their fear of appearing stupid or incompetent, they don’t ask questions about this but rather ask around it with questions like, “How long will it take to get this in place?” Sally misunderstands this as a Level One response and provides factual information about rollout of the new program, which serves to make these staff members more anxious and, therefore, more resistant.

To respond to Level Two Resistance, you do not have to be a psychologist or social worker. You need to have the clear intention of listening and the capacity to manage your own emotional reactivity to what the other person is saying so that you really hear the other person. If Sally listens in this way to those who are concerned about what this change will mean for their competence in their roles, chances are they will tell her what is actually bothering them. Then, together, they will be able to determine how to address the skill gap—if, indeed, there is one—and her “resisters” will now be active supporters of the new program.
There are others in Sally’s facility at Level Two Resistance who are not concerned about their own capacity to manage the change, but have seen so many new ideas come and go and are therefore skeptical about their practicability. They also have their own ideas about what needs to change and don’t feel that their experience is valued, so they stand against any new ideas, no matter how compelling they might seem. Again, the strategy here is for Sally to invite them to share their responses to her ideas and to offer their own. There is likely to be something in what they say, no matter if it is very small, that can be incorporated into the proposed project. Once people have been heard, generally resistance dissipates and often those who have had the strongest objection become the staunchest champions of the new approach.

**Level Three: “I Don’t Like You”**

Level Three Resistance (Maurer, 2010) is the deepest level of resistance. Described as Bigger Than the Current Change, it is often the hardest to address. Sometimes it’s personal—there may be someone who just doesn’t like Sally’s style, manner, or how she approaches her job, or someone who took offense to something she said or did and can’t let go of it. More often, however, it is a resistance to what Sally or someone like her represents: it could be her position and role power, or the fact that she is the Director of Rehab, or her gender or ethnicity, or something else that the person at this level of resistance is projecting onto her. To work with this level of resistance requires Sally to objectify information and not take it personally, and to identify and resist emotional triggers. With that in place, listening with curiosity can still be effective. For some at this level, being listened to may shift their perspective and the resistance will fade. However, because this resistance is deeper, it might not be possible to shift the person. It may be important to just accept that this is where they are, and to decide whether to change the messenger or proceed without them.

**From Resistance to Buy-In**

Most resistance is not Level Three, which also means that most resistance presents an opportunity for engagement. When resistance is invited, helpful information can be obtained, information that would otherwise go unidentified and not used. Inviting resistance also provides mechanisms to get others invested in your program. According to Rick Maurer, a national authority on resistance and change, “Resistance at any level is good because it demonstrates that others hear you and are intrigued enough about your ideas to oppose them” (2002). Your “resisters” can become your staunchest supporters—if you take the time to listen.

**References**

