

Facing Resistance: Getting Grounded as We Reach for Change

Framing

As we seek to create equitable systems - we are resisting (the status quo of inequities) and we are going to encounter resistance (discomfort and struggle with change). Getting grounded in the realities of resistance can help us to show up more powerfully and courageously as we seek to change systems.

We want to be aware of and prepared for resistance. It's important to remember that not all resistance is harmful or oppressive. We need to slow down and think about the nature of the resistance we are encountering. Our goal is to practice discernment when we encounter resistance in ourselves or others - to name what we are experiencing and not get stuck in or stopped by it.

Definition of Resistance

There are multiple definitions of resistance that can help us to see the complexity we are navigating when we encounter resistance:

- In physics resistance is defined as:
 - a measure of the opposition to current flow in an electrical circuit
- The Oxford Dictionary defines resistance as:
 - the refusal to accept or comply with something;
 - the attempt to prevent something by action or argument.
- The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines resistance as:
 - the power or capacity to resist;
 - an opposing or impeding force.

Synonyms of resistance: immunity, reluctance, unwillingness, counteraction, disinclination to accept, struggle, hindrance, withstanding, protecting

Nature of Resistance

Resistance is natural

Resistance is part of the natural world. Resistance to motion - or friction - helps with seed germination, aids in water storage and is an essential ingredient in creating fire. In nature there is a reciprocal relationship between flow and resistance. As resistance increases flow decreases and vice versa.

The absence of resistance, friction and tension does not mean all is well. Inequities embedded deep within our systems for generations have created a smooth and efficient flow for business as usual to continue. Reaching for equitable systems change is an attempt to shift where and how and things flow. Through this process forces are awakened, many things are activated.

Resistance is natural. The goal isn't to avoid it, but to recognize and understand it, be ready for it, and build our muscles of resilience.

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Reminders to reflect on:

- Think of all the things that wouldn't exist without friction
- Traction can be the catalyst for forward movement
- It's important to pause and lead with curiosity when encountering resistance in order to really understand what's happening

Resistance is a powerful force

Power is our ability to make or block change. Resistance is a way to exercise power. Power is neutral; it can be used to advance equity and can reinforce inequities. Resistance movements have long existed to push against oppressive forces and governments. Resistance can be a revolutionary act. Resistance can be constructive and it can be harmful.

As we navigate resistance it's important to practice both/and thinking in order to avoid the ways in which either/or thinking can set us up to fall into us vs. them dynamics. Systems are complex, our movements are complex and humans are complex. The work of systems change invites us to lean into complexity.

Reminders to reflect on:

- What has history taught us about resistance? What resistance movements have shaped you and your thinking? Who are the ancestors you want to remember and learn from?
- What both/and realities are present in your current situation?
- Are there multiple truths about whether the resistance you are navigating is constructive or harmful?
- How can you meet resistance with curiosity and uncover its complexity?

Resistance exists on a continuum

Not all resistance to equitable systems change is the same. Resistance to our change efforts can grow out of fear, lack of skills or knowledge, or due to uncertainty. Resistance can also involve people working actively against equity in an effort to maintain current power structures.

To the degree possible, we want to understand the resistance we are facing and the root causes that underlie it. This can help us to be mindful of what we are taking on and to be realistic about the pace of change and outcomes we can expect.

Reminders to reflect on:

- What is the nature of the resistance we face? What might be the root causes of this resistance?
- What are the conditions: Where is resistance impeding our efforts? Where is there traction that we can leverage?
- As we reflect on where resistance is present - What is possible? Can we begin our efforts in places where the possibility for change is present? Are there things within my power to do that can change the conditions? If the time is right to lean into the big challenges, what support do we need to navigate the resistance?

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Systemic resistance

Changing how an institution or system behaves is challenging because it is massive, has power, and can be resistant without repercussions. Many systems have existed for multiple generations resulting in entrenched policies and practices that can carry the legacies of past oppressive norms and values.

Individuals within systems can be passive (as opposed to actively resistant) falling back on policies, norms and practices that are codified and normalized. There is momentum and precedent for continuing to do things the “way we have always done them.” Workers within systems can simply perform their job duties and be reinforcing inequities. Creating equitable systems change requires resisting the mundane daily actions that keep the inequitable status quo in place.

Systems can also be strategically resistant utilizing existing policies as excuses for why change cannot take place. Bureaucracy can also be used to slow or halt systems change, creating endless requirements or processes that must be completed before change can proceed.

It's important to remember that no one person can overcome historic systemic resistance. Changing systems requires consistent efforts over time on the part of many individuals across the system.

Reminders to reflect on:

- Resistance is less exhausting when done in community: who are our accomplices and co-conspirators? How can we work together with others?
- Our social location impacts the level of risk we take when we resist systemic inequities.
 - For those of us who take a greater level of risk because we are in targeted identities:
 - How can we be strategic about when we do and don't resist?
 - How do we remember that inequities are systemic and not take individual responsibility for systemic realities - e.g. we refuse to be scapegoated or tokenized?
 - For those of us who are part of the dominant culture and therefore experience less risk when we resist:
 - How can we leverage our privilege to challenge the status quo?
 - How can we act as accomplices for those who are targeted by the system?
- How can we recognize this is long-term work and give ourselves permission to reach for good enough? Can we focus on - what is our next wise action?
- What's ours to be accountable for? What do we need to let go of?

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Individual & Personal Resistance

Personal resistance

As we navigate systems change we may also encounter resistance within ourselves. Given that resistance is a natural force, it is no surprise that it exists within us. When we feel resistance emerging in us we can remember that it's a natural response. Our goal is not to block it, but to embrace it and get curious about it.

When we use systemic thinking we remember that we are both impacted by and impacting the systems, organizations and communities in which we are seeking to create equity. We are embedded in these ecosystems that carry with them generations of historical trauma as well as present day oppression. Feelings of discomfort are inevitable when working to create equitable change in the world we live in today.

We can find ourselves feeling resistant for a variety of reasons. Resistance can be an important indicator that can provide us valuable insight. Are we feeling resistant because we are being asked to compromise our core values? Or because there is a lack of accountability, trust and safety? In these instances, resistance may be an important way to exercise our power and agency.

At other times, we may feel resistant because we are ill-equipped and don't feel ready to take on what is being asked of us. Or because we feel uncertain, overwhelmed or threatened and feel pulled to protect ourselves. In these cases, we may need to reflect on what support we need to allow our resistance to soften so that we can remain engaged in seeking to advance equity.

Reminders to reflect on:

- What does resistance feel like in your body? What are the indicators that you are feeling resistant?
- You've been resistant before and you've overcome it before - it will soften over time. What has helped you overcome resistance in the past?
- What do you need (context, support, skill, etc)? What would build your capacity to lean into what you are feeling resistant around?
- What is my role in contributing to resistance? Am I blocking positive change?

Resistance rooted in fear

Often resistance emerges from discomfort around the unknown. In other words, it is fueled by our fears. Fear of failure, fear of adaptive change, fear of uncertainty. We are set-up to be afraid because as adults we constantly receive the message that we should already know what we are doing and that we should be able to do it alone.

The reality of creating equitable systems change is that it will require stepping into the unknown. We have never created equitable systems before, as a result we cannot know all of what is

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needed. And creating new ways of operating will likely require many cycles of failing and learning from our failures.

Reminders to reflect on:

- Fear is temporary
- Our goal cannot be to avoid fear and uncertainty. We get to use our discernment to identify whether our fears are a natural part of the discomfort brought on by change or whether they are an indicator of dangerous or costly risks.
- We need each other to get clarity. Am I being driven by fear? Our personal feelings aren't always reality. Naming our fears with others helps us better discern what is actually happening and possible. We can help each other get grounded.

Resistance to change

Change elicits feelings. Everyone has a unique relationship to change based on their lived experience. When we seek to create equitable systems change in organizations and systems we often activate people's feelings based on their past experiences of change - both positive and negative. This can lead to a variety of responses to change, including resistance.

Resistance to change shows up in a variety of ways for a variety of reasons. People can resist due to a lack of understanding of the proposed changes, what they would mean and why they are happening. Or people's resistance can lead them to block change by citing "it's not the right time" or "we don't have the budget or capacity" or "that should not be our priority."

Reminders to reflect on:

- Change is already part of our story - it can be a constructive part of our story. We can be intentional, guiding and shaping the change.
- Remember the big picture: The process of change can feel hard so it is important to remember why you are undertaking the change (to advance equity!)
- Letting go of control and comfort - being okay with not knowing and giving ourselves time to learn new ways of operating.

Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone.

Remember that, my child. Remember that you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does. - Margaret Atwood