

# Reducing Resistance to Change and Conflict: A Key to Successful Leadership

## Article Three: Understanding and Respect

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This is the third in a series of articles that examines the essential role of a leader in reducing resistance to change, in order to promote growth in an organization. The first article explored basic models of change that help us understand why resistance occurs (CBAM – the Concerns Based Adoption Model by Frances Fuller (Hall, et. al. 1972) and The Stages of Transition and the Four P's of Transition by William Bridges and Susan Mitchell (Bridges & Mitchell 2000)). The second article presented models of decision-making, and explored why it is important to build an organizational culture in which it is safe for employees to disagree with one another and with management.

This article examines the relationship between two fundamental keys that must exist in any group before communication can be effective. These are the keys of *understanding* and *respect*.

### **The relationship between misunderstandings and disagreements**

When the “soft skills” of listening and understanding are taught as important management techniques people often respond with comments such as, “Yeah, I know all that stuff about listening. But I don’t have time for that. There is too much important work to get done.” The implication here is that the cost of time and human resources invested into listening and understanding is not worth the return. Let’s examine the costs of not listening, which in turn create a work environment in which people do not feel understood.

In a 2003 survey, 256 employees of a government organization were asked, “What percentage of disagreements do you think are caused by misunderstandings?” The average response was 71%, with a range of responses from 5-99%. Participants were then asked, “Of the disagreements that are caused by misunderstandings, what percentage of those are caused because *you* misunderstand?” The average response was 39%, with a range of responses from 0-100%. Suddenly the numbers are significantly reduced! (*See Appendix: Communication Survey*) Most people admit that, in the middle of a disagreement, the other person needs to understand. Of course the other person is thinking the same thing of them. Everyone wants to be understood, but everyone is waiting for the other person to do it first. (Resource 2003)

If it is true that most disagreements are caused by misunderstandings, then when the misunderstanding is resolved and understanding occurs, there is no disagreement. This suggests that anywhere from 50-90% of the time people disagree with one another, they actually have an agreement that already exists. Someone is just misunderstanding. It also suggests that the ability to create clear understanding will resolve a large percentage of disagreements.

Unfortunately, when faced with a disagreement many people respond by trying to get the opposing person to let go of his or her opposing position and agree with their own position. Often this pressure causes resistance, even if both people actually want the same thing. Being aware of these three different categories of disagreements can give leaders valuable insight into resolving conflicts.

### **Categories of Disagreements**

**Category 1: Misunderstandings:** These disagreements are simply misunderstandings. In this category, when you make sure everyone is understood you find that there is no disagreement, simply a misunderstanding. You actually had an agreement, but someone just misunderstood. Most people believe that 50-90% of disagreements fall into this category.

**Category 2: Negotiable Disagreements:** In this category, there is no misunderstanding. You do disagree. But the solution is negotiable. One side or another is willing to make an adjustment because it is not an absolute requirement. The question to ask here is, “What would it take for me to want to do what they want me to do?” Most people believe that anywhere from 8-40% of disagreements fall into this category.

**Category 3: Non-Negotiable Disagreements:** In this category, not only is there no misunderstanding, but there is no negotiation. Each side has taken an absolute stand for their fundamental requirements. But even when this is true, one thing might be a requirement for one person, but not a requirement for another person. So there may still be room for negotiation. Most people find that only 2-5% of disagreements fall into this category. But many people respond to all disagreements as if they are in this last category where there is no alternative but their own point of view, and so they are not able to recognize and thus resolve misunderstandings and negotiable disagreements. (Resource 1993)

A great deal of emphasis has been given to the skill of *understanding*, in order to resolve disagreements, establish trust, build cooperation, and reduce resistance. This is certainly not a new concept. But different people have a different understanding of what it is to “be understanding.”

## Understanding What Understanding Really Is

Plato is known to have said, “No law or ordinance is mightier than understanding.” (Cooper 1997) However, **it is ironic that the concept of understanding may be widely misunderstood.** The process of communicating information from one mind to another is often imprecise.

Too often people believe that understanding occurs when they think they understand. But how do you know that what you think I said is what I really meant? Does understanding occur when you think you understand? Or does it occur when the other person feels understood?

It may be true that the receiver fully understands what the speaker has communicated, both verbally and nonverbally. The receiver may even understand more clearly than the speaker. However, if the speaker feels misunderstood, he or she is still likely to feel unsupported and will resist the receiver’s input. **In order to reduce this resistance, the receiver should focus on making sure the speaker feels understood, before trying to express another point of view.** This is especially true if the receiver disagrees. In physics, when there is less resistance it takes less energy to move an object (Henderson 2001). In relationships, when there is less emotional resistance it takes less effort to influence another person.

Unfortunately, most people grow up feeling misunderstood by authority figures. Few children ever hear their parents stop in the middle of a disagreement and say, “I’m sorry, what did you want me to know about that?” When these children grow into adulthood they expect other authority figures to act with the same disregard for their input. In psychology this is referred to as transference.

It is an unfortunate reality that managers, supervisors, and leaders at any level will have to deal with this unconscious transference of resistance to authority by their employees. Since this challenge of transference is inevitable, it becomes even more important for leaders to develop the skill of reducing the expected resistance to authority by making people feel understood.

But making sure people feel understood is not just an emotional feel-good fix, and it does not simply mean agreeing with people in order to avoid conflict. Again, the emphasis here is on how to reduce resistance before trying to get one’s point across. The goal is not just to make the other person feel good.

Using the phrase “help the other person *feel* understood” may imply that one must somehow avoid making the other person feel bad, and instead make them feel good. While such emotions may result when a person is understood, it is not the goal. Too often, people simply try to avoid the discomfort of conflict in order to establish a “feel-good atmosphere,” which only results in a false harmony that suppresses honest and open communication. As Lencioni stated, leaders must

“identify artificial harmony when they see it, and incite productive conflict in its place.” (Lencioni 2003)

Making sure people feel understood does not mean agreeing with them. You can disagree with people and still make sure they feel understood. You can agree with people and they may still feel misunderstood. Often, people may be willing to accept a disagreement if they feel understood. In the Resource survey, 96% of respondents said they would be more likely to do something they agreed with if their supervisor took the time to sincerely understand their concerns. (Resource 2003.) Conversely, many people will not even accept an agreement if they feel misunderstood. What is important is that people (1) recognize and (2) confirm that what you know is what they mean.

Virginia Satir has said that much of what people communicate is done nonverbally, leaving more in between the lines than in the actual script (Satir 1988). Therefore one must not only ensure that one understands what the person said, but also what they did not say – but meant to say. This also becomes a process for getting people to take responsibility for what they are saying, and for what they are leaving unsaid. Some people are very skilled at sounding kind and supportive on one level while leaving unsettling implications that breed dissent. A good example of this is a person who is demonstrating passive-aggressive behavior. He may be verbally passive by not saying anything, but nonverbally aggressive with a derogatory glance or sigh. A skilled leader can bring these implications out in the open where they can be openly discussed and resolved. The Five Levels of a Clear Communication<sup>®</sup> and the Six Stages for Building Supportive Agreements<sup>®</sup>, described below, are two models developed by Resource International that help achieve such clarity and understanding.

Being understanding is too often associated with being soft and being a pushover. In the 2003 survey of 256 government employees (Resource 2003), 64% said they were concerned that people would take advantage of them if they tried to be understanding during an argument. This is another common misconception of what understanding truly is. According to Dale Carnegie, “Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain, and most fools do. But it takes character and self control to be understanding and forgiving (Carnegie 1990).” One can forgive people for what they have said or done, and still set clear guidelines and hold people accountable for the consequences of their behaviors.

According to Webster’s New World Dictionary (Webster 1968), the word *understand* originates from the Old English *understandan* “to stand under or among.” One can infer from this that the meaning of being understanding is to stand under, or to provide support for another’s point of view, not in the sense of agreeing but in allowing.

## The Martial Art of Communication

Consider an analogy from the martial arts. To gain leverage over an opponent, a martial artist first establishes firm footing. Next he absorbs the enemy's blows by being fluid and flexible. He then establishes common ground by positioning himself as close as possible to the opponent with a lower center of gravity, which provides leverage to move the opponent. He gains leverage by "standing under" the opponent. If he uses that leverage to cause harm, he might win the battle but lose the war, because the opponent is likely to continue fighting for revenge.

Now consider this – A takes one side of an argument, B takes an opposing side, and they argue to prove which position is right and which is wrong. If A attacks and causes B to feel hurt and angry, what will B try to cause A to feel in order to achieve revenge? Probably hurt and anger, with compounded interest. Notice that the goal of revenge is an "understanding" of the hurt and anger. Because B wants A to understand B's pain, B is motivated to cause A to feel pain. Then the cycle of pain continues.



But what if A first focuses on understanding B? B does not feel the pain of being misunderstood, and so is less likely to be defensive or aggressive. A can reduce B's resistance to A's ideas or suggestions more quickly, establish common ground from which a common agreement can be built. The goal can be accomplished without the pain and therefore with less effort.



One must stand firmly for one's fundamental requirements (Be Firm), be flexible regarding one's preferences (Be Flexible), avoid imposing on others while simultaneously not letting them walk all over you (Be Balanced), and actively seek to understand the other person's viewpoint (Be Actively Receptive). To master these four Be-Attitudes of the Martial Art of Communication<sup>®</sup> (Resource 1993) is an art. It is much easier said than done.

The teachings from The Art of War, by Sun Tzu, and The Book of Five Rings, by Miyamoto Musashi (Sun Tzu 1991, Musashi 1993), have provided guidance to businessmen, politicians, and military strategists on successful strategy and leadership. Thomas Cleary's introduction reveals, ". . . in Sun Tzu's philosophy the peak efficiency of knowledge and strategy is to make conflict altogether unnecessary." Cleary indicates that an aggressive leader who combines force with authority is not really ruthless, but is instead "an emotionalist". What a superior leader needs is objectivity, an ability to step outside of one's own

*understanding* of the situation (Sun Tzu 1991).

But according to Cleary this is “an objectivity that includes oneself in its cutting assessment of the real situation (Sun Tzu 1991).” A superior leader considers all viewpoints objectively, including one’s own, before deciding on a course of action. According to Kenneth Rose (Rose, 2002), John Kotter says, “a leader needs enough understanding to fashion an intelligent strategy.” A leader who establishes an atmosphere in which people can freely express their concerns, knowing that the leadership will seek to understand and respond to these concerns, will gather much more valuable information from those people, and meet much less resistance in implementing strategies.

The kind of *understanding* being described here is synonymous with *respect*. The word *respect* derives from the Latin root word, *respectare*, the root of which is *spectare*, which means, “to look” (Webster 1968). This is the same root for words such as *spectacles* or *perspective*. “*Re*”-*spectare* means to look back, or to look again at something. **To give respect to someone is to be able to step outside of one’s own perspective, and look back at it from another person’s point of view.** This aligns with the meaning of the root word, *understandan*, “to stand among” (Webster 1968). This does not necessarily mean that one agrees with the other person. To know whether one disagrees, one must first understand what the other person thinks. To further reduce that person’s resistance, one must make sure that he or she feels understood.

This sounds suspiciously similar to what has been described in this article as making sure the other person experiences feeling clearly understood. For a leader to establish a respectful relationship with others, he or she must be able to communicate a clear understanding for their concerns, and show how such concerns are being addressed. Consider the following case study from a government organization.

### **A Case Study in Respect and Understanding**

A Manager of a government facility had been approving work orders for the carpentry department for twenty-six years. One day it occurred to him that he had never actually gone onsite to evaluate these jobs, or to check on progress. He habitually signed off on work orders, and left onsite responsibility to the front line Supervisor. He realized that he did not know what the Supervisor did, so the Manager went to watch the repair work on a doorway in a loading dock. After a few minutes he got the information he needed, and returned to his desk to continue signing work orders.

Three years later while working with teambuilding consultants, the Supervisor finally took the risk to bring up his upset about this incident as an example of how the Manager did not respect the Supervisor’s work. He recounted when the Manager had come to watch over his work

because he didn't trust him to get it done right. The Manager patiently focused on repeating what the Supervisor was saying, in order to help the supervisor feel understood. He didn't agree or disagree. He avoided justifying, defending himself, or saying such obvious things as, "It's my job to oversee your work!" The Manager first made sure that the Supervisor felt understood on five levels, then confirmed what he did agree with by saying such things as, "Yes, I do remember coming to look at the work on that door," and "You're right, I did not talk to you about it. I can understand why that would have been suspicious and frustrating for you."

The consultants made sure that the conversation continued until the Supervisor confirmed, "Yes, the Manager does understand everything that is important to me about this incident." They then asked the Supervisor if he had ever taken the initiative to talk to the Manager to clear up the situation. The Supervisor said, "Oh course not. Since he doesn't respect me he won't listen to what I have to say." The consultants asked if the Manager had ever done this before or after this incident. The Supervisor considered this and replied, "Well, no, I guess not." So they asked if he would be interested in hearing what the Manager thought.

The Manager expressed how he had always been so impressed with the Supervisor's work that he never felt the need to watch over him. He explained that he had come to observe the work on that one doorway because he was curious. When he saw what good work was being done, he walked away knowing that his original impression that the work was in good hands had been correct. He had renewed his complete respect and trust in the Supervisor's work, and that's why he had never checked out any other work sites since that day.

Unfortunately, for the past three years the Supervisor had nursed his resentment at being disrespected, had communicated it to any person who would listen and was constantly dissatisfied in his relationship with his Manager. He shared his upset with people who also felt misunderstood. A misperception spread throughout the organization that management did not respect the skills and judgment of the front line supervisors.

The irony is that the Manager had tremendous respect for this Supervisor. But he did not communicate this respect clearly to the supervisor, who consequently felt misunderstood and disrespected. To be an effective leader, it is not enough to think you respect someone. For the respect to have impact, the person must know and confirm that you understand his or her concerns. The person must experience the respect. When the Supervisor recognized the Manager understood his concerns, he considered the possibility that respect did exist. That did not heal three years of hurt, but it began the process of rebuilding trust.

Although everyone knows it is important to be respectful and understanding, this is easier said than done in everyday practice. The fourth article in this series presents a collection of individual communication techniques and group processes that can help build these principles as common practices.

## Appendix

August, 2003 Resource International Survey on attitudes about resistance to authority in work relationships

A range of employee attitudes concerning resistance to authority was measured, including sabotage, not doing a good job, doing the minimum required, and not being motivated to do a task with which they disagree. Employees anticipated that when their supervisor treats them with disrespect, up to 74% of respondents would exhibit varying degrees of resistance. Resistance was still present in 71% of employees, even when employees agree with the task given to them by their supervisor. But employees' attitudes about resistance drops significantly to 29% when they think their supervisors treat them respectfully, decreasing the more severe forms of resistance (doing minimum, not doing good job, sabotage) by as much as 58%. When treated respectfully by a supervisor, 42% more employees (a 59% increase!) believe they are likely to eagerly do a task with which they disagree, and do everything they can to do a good job. This suggests that respectful behavior from an authority figure is more likely to reduce resistance and increase motivation than will trying to get employees to agree.

Situation	Employee + task + attitude				
	do <u>eagerly</u>	do <u>not motivated</u>	do <u>minimum</u>	not do <u>good job</u>	not do <u>+sabotage</u>
+ Supervisor behavior					
Disagree +Disrespect	26%	55%	15%	3%	1%
Agree +Disrespect	29%	59%	11%	1%	1%
Disagree +Respect	71%	23%	6%	2%	0%