

# Physician Executives Forum Online Newsletter – Quarter 1, 2016

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## Professional Pointers:

### Succeeding in the Face of Resistance

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Consider this situation: After months of advocating for additional coverage hours for the hospital ICU, the chief of the pulmonary and critical care division successfully negotiated a schedule change with administration. She shared the good news with her colleagues that the coverage would increase from nine to twelve hours per day, as requested. Several of the physicians reported, “I had not thought about what this change would do to my life. I don’t want to do it.” While the coverage would improve patient care and revenue, the reality of additional hours to an already long day created unexpected tension about the change. Frustrated and confused, she lamented, “We have been pushing to get this schedule change through for some time, with the full support of the team. What could I have done to avoid resistance now?”

Implementing change is especially challenging now when many forces reshaping healthcare leave physicians feeling powerless.

### **Myth: People Naturally Resist Change**

A common belief is that resistance is the natural human response to change. However, not all change provokes resistance. We seek change we choose freely.

### **Reason for Resistance**

Based on three-plus decades of research, human development expert [T. Falcon Napier](#) reports people are resistant to a loss of control; the sense you could lose control of what is important creates tension. Of three criteria that must be met before change occurs—logic, feasibility, and level of tension—tension is most critical. Too little tension provides no motivation to change; too much tension results in feeling overwhelmed.

Often, we focus on logical and feasible cases for making a change, instead of exploring tension individuals involved experienced. In the example above, the change implemented was both logical and feasible. Resistance occurred because staff had tension about change. People who resist change have something else they know, care about or enjoy.

## **Symptoms of Resistance**

Anger and complaints are obvious expressions of resistance. Other symptoms of resistance include:

- Verbal agreement coupled with limited follow-through
- Slow progress
- Excuses for lack of progress

## **Position Power vs. Personal Power**

Viewing resistance as healthy, natural and useful parts of the change process is key to addressing resistance constructively. The division chief could have used the authority of her position to push the schedule change through. Instead, she recognized it would be better for her to acknowledge individual perspectives and concerns and for the team to rely on trust and respect. Her goal was to leave everyone feeling more in control of the change, rather than feeling coerced, which would have led to more resistance.

Resistance can be mild or major, depending on how disruptive the change feels to an individual. Several team members were particularly upset by the proposed change. Instead of holding another group meeting to review the facts, the division chief met personally with each of the reluctant physicians. She focused on understanding, acknowledging, and addressing their concerns. She was able to get consensus to start the schedule change as planned with an agreement to re-evaluate in 90 days if they found the schedule change unsustainable.

## **Strategies to Address Resistance**

**Start with yourself.** Honestly explore your feelings about the change to avoid conveying unintended non-verbal messages.

**Acknowledge the apprehension staff may feel about a proposed change.** With every change—even good change—a loss occurs.

**Listen to understand, not just to respond.** Listening without judgment acknowledges validity of another's perspective, even if you don't agree.

**Create a safe space for concerns to be expressed by listening and acknowledging emotions described, not merely the words spoken.** Being comfortable with strong feelings is required!

My recommendation to the division chief regarding how to be proactive in addressing resistance was to go beyond the logical, feasible case. In the future, she will explore physical and emotional components of a proposed change. Taking the time to listen and asking good questions when resistance is encountered are investments that pay off in the long run.

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