

Sample from the Education Guide

Gratitude: One thing I can say for sure is that I would not be in the position that I am in had I not had the benefit of a couple of great teachers; and in my time, they indeed came out of this public system. I am eternally grateful for their influence in shaping who I am today. My third-grade teacher, Helen Stroup, was a paragon of a self-esteeming woman, and would accept nothing less than my best, even challenging me to a personal race through the times-tables in front of the room. My early mathematics teacher in high school, Ted Thebe, showed enough faith in me to raise my own expectations of what I could do . . . not just in math, but in life, entering me in math contests and helping me prepare on weekends. I'm sure that many people that I will speak to about reform have shared similar experiences and are grateful for them.. My own mother, who only had a high-school education, nonetheless believed in the value of as much education as one could get. It was her focus and persuasion that made it possible for me to be the first and only member of my family to go to university and beyond, something not common in her generation.

Acknowledging Resistance

Your expressions of authentic gratitude will help others recognize your humanity, but might do little to give them an experience of your empathy with their own points of view. Resistance and disagreement are natural responses to a call for change. Before making that call, you need to consider what people might be thinking and feeling about this issue. You need to consider what their natural mental and emotional resistance to this change might be, and be ready to acknowledge this resistance in advance. In very real terms, this is “empathy in advance”—it is a chance to consider others before you actually encounter them. As you know, people don't like change, and at first mention, lacking context or further explanation, they will resist, even if they don't show it.

In business lore of the 1950s, Alfred Sloan, head of General Motors, was purportedly in a board meeting, about to make an important decision. He said, “I take it that everyone is in basic agreement with this decision.” Everyone nodded. Sloan looked at the group and said, “Then I suggest we postpone the decision. Until we have some disagreement, we don't understand the problem.”⁵ Of course he was right. Often, resistance will remain silent unless the leader is sensitive and smart enough to acknowledge it up front. When it is acknowledged, resistance can be a powerful building block for eventual agreement and engagement. As you build your Guide, considering other points of view and possible objections is important to your being able to think through the cogency of your own ideas. More important, it is central to being able to acknowledge others' ideas and feelings as a way of building trust.

Of course, most of us fail to do this. We think through others' arguments, but we define them only as hurdles that we have to knock down or leap over to get our own way, rather than the reasonable points of view of others we hope to lead into a relationship of trust. Jim Nunan, a friend, client, and long-time high-level HR executive, told me a story about one of his general managers who'd been the focus of a series of complaints from employees. While the complaints varied in intensity, the subject matter was always the same—the executive did not listen. Jim made an appointment to speak to the executive about the problem and arrived at the appointed time.

He began to spell out the problem, and noticed that as he spoke, the executive was making notes on the pad on his desk. “This is impressive,” mused Jim. “He's writing down what I'm saying. It doesn't look like a lack of listening to me.” Just then the executive was called from the room to take a phone call. Quickly, Jim looked at the notes. The GM had not been taking notes—he had been writing down his rebuttal.

Most of us are actively thinking about rebuttal, even if we are not making notes. If you are a change agent, your strong statements of purpose will amplify feelings and ideas of resistance in others, and will probably provoke expressions of discontent. These contrary ideas and feelings of discontent are present whether you acknowledge them or not. By bringing them to the surface, you establish your ability to be empathetic, and you demonstrate your willingness to become a partner rather than an adversary. By shining light on these thoughts and feelings early, you maintain and reinforce your motivation. In fact, recognizing resistance as normal gives you yet another chance to create real limbic resonance with others, to connect with their hearts, not just their minds.

Conversely, if you pretend that acceptance of your new proposal will come without uncertainty, you will lose your credibility. You risk being undermined—and you will never gain the full commitment of others. They may comply, but their resistance will manifest itself in negativity and an absence of energy for the task at hand. Resistance not acknowledged will continue to thrive, not only as others listen to your comments, but also in the halls, bathrooms, cars, and homes where people say what has not been said in your presence. By acknowledging resistance, you are acknowledging reality.

I first heard of this idea from Harvey Stone, a speech coach and writer in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Harvey used the example of a domestic discussion, in which a couple is in a heated exchange, sometimes for days, until one of them (Harvey says it is most often his wife) acknowledges the other's feelings and opinions. Imagine yourself in a combative mood, as your adversary stops, pauses, and says: "You know, I didn't realize that you felt so strongly about this issue. You sound as though you feel hurt, and I know that you honestly disagree with my point of view."

There is no agreement in this statement, only honest noticing and honoring of some strong feelings and a different opinion. While the discussion certainly isn't over, one can feel the adverse energy drain out of the situation, so that ears might be open to hear for the first time in the "discussion." This same release occurs whenever negative feelings and opinions are acknowledged. The respect voiced by the leader for other points of view can open the minds of dissenters as the leader's motivation becomes less suspect. Such acknowledgment does not *guarantee* agreement with your position, but it will dissipate the argumentative energy and open the possibility of honest dialogue.

Rational Resistance and Cynicism

The easiest resistance to suspend is based on different or less knowledge. The leader simply has information that others do not have. Others may be cynical about the proposed change because they think it has been tried before, or they may be fearful of change because of their lack of knowledge. Such resistance can be considered and acknowledged in the beginning of any message. It can be refuted later if need be, but in the spirit of common understanding rather than argument.

What does this look like?

In developing a Guide for a change in supply chain management, John Ure was suggesting a new focus on customers, a holistic approach that would create an integration of the supply chain. He made the following notes about resistance:

When thinking about this new way, I can hear voices, my own included, that argue, from Marketing, "I already focus on the customer, although perhaps not to the point of actual intimacy, so why the need to change?" Or from Purchasing, "I have already developed excellent partnership with our suppliers, why do we need to change?" Or from Design, "Don't come and tell me how to design a product; I am perfectly competent, so just get on with getting the best price." Indeed we do all of those things, and I don't want to lose this focus, this partnership, or this competency in design.

These notes on resistance do not, in themselves, refute the resistance. They merely help John and others know that he was under no illusions about their point of view. In fact, he acknowledged his own resistance at the same time ("my own included"). When these other players realized that John knew about their doubts and was open to them, they were, in kind, open to hear what else he had to say, and they were willing to engage with him, knowing that he could acknowledge their point of view.

As we've seen, resistance can be a matter of feeling as well as a matter of differences between ideas or intellectual doubts—it can come from uneasiness with whoever the leader seems to be. There were four debates in the 2012 U.S. presidential election cycle. In the first, the President was described as "listless, smirking, demeaning, and seeming to be intellectually superior," while his opponent was seen as "aggressive, assertive, and confident." The vice-presidential debate was described by a CNN reporter as "really great television" because the candidates were animated and argumentative. Still, the vice president frequently mimicked his opponent by interrupting with "blah, blah, blah"—brash, disrespectful, and arrogant.

Resistance is not always conscious, and in fact is frequently created by just such subtle actions or impressions. It was not hard for me to imagine that the vice-presidential debate was a mirror of what goes on in the U.S. Congress every day—the disrespectful and overbearing expressing of polarized opinions in a polarizing way. It is no wonder that very little is accomplished.

Resistance based on a different or inadequate understanding of the facts can be relieved with explanation. John Ure went on to address the resistance later in his Guide, by explaining the difference in his new plan and the status quo, using common metaphors to educate others and assuage their fears.

Irrational Resistance—Feelings

Other resistance comes not from any lack of understanding but from just plain fear of change. Tom Haverty runs Bioventures for Merck, one of the world's premier drug manufacturers. He is known for his ability to communicate authentically, and told me in a recent interview that he has had this ability since the fourth grade. "I don't think of the audience's head. I ask myself, 'Where are they emotionally—what would I be thinking if I were in their shoes?' Then I address that issue first."

I asked Tom if he is a good listener, and he said yes. We sparred for a minute about “understanding content,” and “feeling heard.” His distinction was between the two French verbs *écouter* (to listen) and *entendre* (to attend)—exactly the point. As Tom pointed out, giving full attention is quite different from merely hearing words.

The next selection from the Education Guide shows the treatment of resistance.

Sample from the Education Guide

Resistance: I understand that there is not enough money to implement every idea, and that shifting major resources to encourage teachers like my own heroes and heroines will come at the expense of those who teach mostly because it is a safe profession with summers off. And I know how threatening a basic change like this can seem, especially to those who have a vested interest in the status quo—many of whom are doing their best to accomplish the same end that I have in mind.

Some who have worked at reform all of their lives might see this idea as simplistic. Some might feel threatened or unappreciated, and others might just think that I am a real outsider who doesn't understand the system. Truly, many before me, and perhaps better qualified, have had turns at reform.

Of course, I will mention the teachers' unions in this message many times, and while I will note some of the negative impact of the unions on the schools, I realize that much of their activity has been positive and indeed necessary to protect the labor rights of teachers. I also recognize that unions themselves have made significant contribution to the capability of many kids to be able to go to school at all.

Finally, some might hear some of what I have to offer as an indictment of the entire system and be offended by that. Believe me, I understand that feeling. It is hard not to generalize, yet I recognize that there are pockets of excellence in the greater pile of what others might call mediocrity.

Commonality

- What do all the constituents in this change share in common?

Just as acknowledging resistance states our differences—what might draw us apart—commonality synthesizes, it brings us together. Around any change, commonality calls for hope and conviction that we all want the same outcome—only our methods, time line, and perhaps the volume of resources to be devoted to that outcome are different. It is important to acknowledge the common objective, bringing everyone into the same tent, despite fears, despite different ideas and beliefs. This can be a very large tent, as it was for John Kennedy as he defined commonality during his 1963 speech at American University, where he laid out his own belief that world peace was not beyond our grasp: “For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.”⁶

Kennedy uses the broadest commonality—humankind—and the result was immortality for his words. For the Guide on education, not as universal, I wrote the paragraph in the next excerpt.

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Commonality: So I approach this with optimism. I know that while everyone might not agree on the means to the end, we all share the desire for the system to be as robust and effective as possible. Like you, I want the best outcome, the most efficient system, and a renewal of true “public” education, where individuals can count on a level of knowledge and behavior that is consistent, fairly applied, and inspiring. I hope that this discussion is a part of the impetus for meaningful action.

As new questions are asked, as new objections and resistance present themselves, as new commonality becomes apparent, this section is enlarged and clarified, and it becomes more nuanced—all with the same end—not to appear to listen (*écouter*) but to really hear (*entendre*).

Willingness to Be Known: Personal Motivation

- Why does this issue matter to me personally?
- What personal experience or story could demonstrate my conviction?

- What core principle, value, or belief is represented by this change?
- What is it that I stand for in this situation?

To agree to act, people want to know why a change is important to the organization and how they will benefit, but to commit to follow a leader down an uncertain path, they have to know the leader's personal motivation—it is central to trustworthiness. It doesn't have to do with material outcome, it has to do with meaning. "I have a dream," was Martin Luther King's personal motivation. Examining your own motivation and revealing it is part of building trust.

The best example I've ever heard of this aspect of earning trust was brought to my attention by Peter Alduino, a leadership consultant from Santa Cruz and author of *The Citizen Leader*. I grant you that this example is dated, but I have found none more elegant. Peter located a videotape, made in 1974, of the late Barbara Jordan. Jordan, an African American, was then a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Texas, and on the tape was speaking to the committee hearing the evidence to impeach former President Nixon. As a junior member of the committee, she spoke for fifteen minutes, including this prologue:

Earlier today, we heard the beginning to the preamble to the Constitution of the United States . . . "we the people," a very eloquent beginning. But when that document was completed on the seventeenth of September in 1787, I was not included in "we the people."

I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake. But through the process of amendment, interpretation, and court decision, I have finally been included in "we the people."

Today I am an inquisitor, and hyperbole would not be fictional and would not overstate the *solemnness* that I feel right now. My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total. And I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution.⁷

There is no question about Jordan's personal motivation, why it matters to her personally, the core principles at stake, and what she stands for. Her personal experience, like the beginning to the Constitution's preamble, is elegant. Any constituent who felt equally disenfranchised or felt strongly about equality would be inspired by her statement. Notice that it is personal, not theoretical. Jordan did not say, "Everyone should be diligent in protecting the constitution, because it is the basis of our freedom as a nation." Although she certainly would agree with that statement, her personal motivation is what creates the platform for her very personal leadership on this issue.

One of the most intelligent and globally insightful executives I've ever worked with is Nick Roelofs, president of Agilent's Life Sciences Group. Nick was a true prodigy and had the privilege of meeting and speaking with a number of Nobel Prize winners at a very young age. In working with him as he developed a Guide for his enterprise, I asked what got him into this business. He said, "At one point I realized that I was probably not going to win a Nobel Prize—and I decided I wanted to build tools for those who would." I encouraged him, with some success, to tell that to others, to consider it as part of his Personal Leadership Communication Guide. When he first shared it, people remembered it, because it is true, it is reflective, it is personal, and it is inspiring.

Meaning is conveyed when we can connect our actions to our personal values. Sometimes that is done with a story, as it was with me as I realized the connection between delivering kids to college and delegation. The experience made delegation meaningful to me, just as Barbara Jordan's very intense personal experience made the health of the Constitution meaningful to her.

Many might think that this connection can't be made in a business environment, but consider the story of Howard Schultz that I related in [Chapter One](#). Schultz was very clear about his personal motivation for building Starbucks into the kind of company it is, where everyone feels like a partner. His experience with his father drove his values to the surface, and he was able to express them later in his business. Schultz's revelation carried with it not only his personal motivation but the aura of vulnerability that brings others close.

The next selection presents what is in the education Leadership Communication Guide for personal motivation.