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By Kerry Gordon, PhD

Resistance is Fertile

Helping clients lead by example

With major corporations like Hewlett-Packard, Royal Dutch Shell and Kimberly Clark leading the way, business organizations large and small are beginning to get the message — that the new demands of global business and rapidly shifting technology require leaders capable not only of anticipating and responding to change but also inspiring others to follow their lead. This is a tall order for those executives not adequately prepared to deal with the human face of change. And indeed, as a business coach working at the corporate level, it is my experience that executives are far more comfortable strategizing for change than dealing with the human consequences of implementing those strategies. That's why understanding the psychology of change is critical for coaches who aspire to help their clients develop the emotional intelligence necessary to negotiate the stress and turbulence inherent in leading for change.

In this article I want to consider change and its evil twin, resistance, from a unique perspective that has helped me in coaching my business clients to be more effective leaders for change.

Executive or manager, any leader who has tried to initiate change will doubtlessly have experienced first hand the frustration that comes in the face of mind-numbing, foot-dragging resistance. And it doesn't seem to matter what they do — explain, cajole, reward, demand, threaten — they invariably report spending more time fighting resistance than doing the real job of implementing change. But what if the problem is not resistance itself but the way in which we relate to it? What if it turns out that resistance, rather than being a barrier, is actually a doorway for change?

> "Resistance conceived as an obstacle, a rock in the stream, is an inappropriate metaphor."

Change as threat

Change inevitably raises the specter of the unknown. Therefore regardless of whether or not the change is beneficial, it is bound to be experienced as a threat by those asked to participate. In my experience coaching senior executives, especially those who have risen through the ranks of Research and Development (for example, as engineers), there seems to be an almost ingrained belief that simply providing more information will automatically eliminate the anxiety (typically expressed as resistance) that naturally attends change. But contrary to this belief, indications are that the more information we throw at resistance the more resistance it inspires.

As a coach, I want to help my clients come to a simple truth — that as human beings we don't respond to change intellectually, we respond emotionally. Whether we are conscious of it or not, the anticipation of change triggers insecurity. We immediately ask ourselves, "How will this change affect my world?" We can't possibly know the answer with any certainty; only that at some level things won't be the same. It is the uncertainty of change that provokes in us a sense of powerlessness, that

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we are somehow being overtaken by events beyond our control. And so for all kinds of reasons we resist — it may be because we feel overburdened by change, or we don't trust the authority imposing it, or perhaps we feel that the change is a threat to our job or challenges our competence. Will this change make more demands on our time and cut into our personal life? Or maybe having always done things in a certain, familiar way, we dig in our heels out of sheer cussedness. The reasons for resistance vary but attempts to explain it away by providing more information do little to address the anxiety and uncertainty that change engenders.

Using the right language

And yet, with respect to resistance, most executives tend to be typical in their response. "This initiative is such a good idea," they insist. "If we can just explain it a little more fully everyone will get on side." In such cases, though my clients may be demonstrating the best of intentions, their efforts to persuade come across like tourists trying to communicate in a foreign land. No matter how carefully they try to explain themselves, the locals look back at them with a blank stare. So what do the tourists do? They speak louder as though the problem is that they're not being heard. In reality, of course, the situation has nothing to do with hearing; it has to do with understanding. If the tourists want a response they must realize that rather than speaking louder they would do better to learn the language.

Similarly, what I want to help my clients realize is that presenting and re-presenting information does not address the central problem of resistance. Effective leadership is not about shouting louder but is about tuning into the reality of the resistance and finding a language that allows for a meaningful level of communication. Most executives and managers charged with leading change tend to see resistance as an obstacle, a barrier to be breached. The feeling is that if they persist and, with superior logic and intellect, hammer away at the resistant rock in the stream, eventually the rock will be dissolved and the stream will flow smoothly again. But resistance conceived as an obstacle, a rock in the stream, is an inappropriate metaphor.

As a coach, my challenge is to help my clients think of resistance not as a barrier but as feedback and understand that their real job is to discern its meaning. Simply put, if resistance is a form of expression, then to be effective, leaders need to be willing to find out what it is that's being expressed.

A new perspective

What I am proposing is a different way of perceiving resistance — not as a thing that prevents change but rather as an integral part of the change process itself. But this is a challenging perspective for most of my clients. Initially, it seems to fly in the face of logic. "If not by providing more information then how am I supposed to address resistance?" The answer doesn't necessarily make the proposition any easier to swallow. But simply put, the most effective way to deal with resistance is through empathy.

In essence, empathy is the ability to put ourselves in another's shoes, to be aware of and sensitive to the feelings of others without their having to explicitly express them to us. Empathy is fundamentally about listening.

> "Empathetic leadership begins, not with fixing, but with connecting to the uncertainty of others by honestly reflecting on our own."

It is the ability to attune, not just to the content of what is being said, but to the emotional field that underlies it. While this may all sound very 'New Age, touchy, feely,' the fact is that in recent years, more and more leadership trainers, coaches and management consultants have begun to recognize empathy as a core leadership competency. And for obvious reasons. Without a developed capacity for empathetic relationship, executives and senior managers cannot hope to enroll their organizations in the level of transformative change that will, in the words of management guru Jim Collins, move their companies from good to great.

The question that concerns us here is whether or not empathy is coachable. It sounds so intuitive that it might be assumed that either one is an empathetic person or one isn't. The truth is quite the opposite — empathetic leaders are made not born. It's a bit like yoga.

While the yogic experience might be characterized as mystical — an experience of oneness or unity —

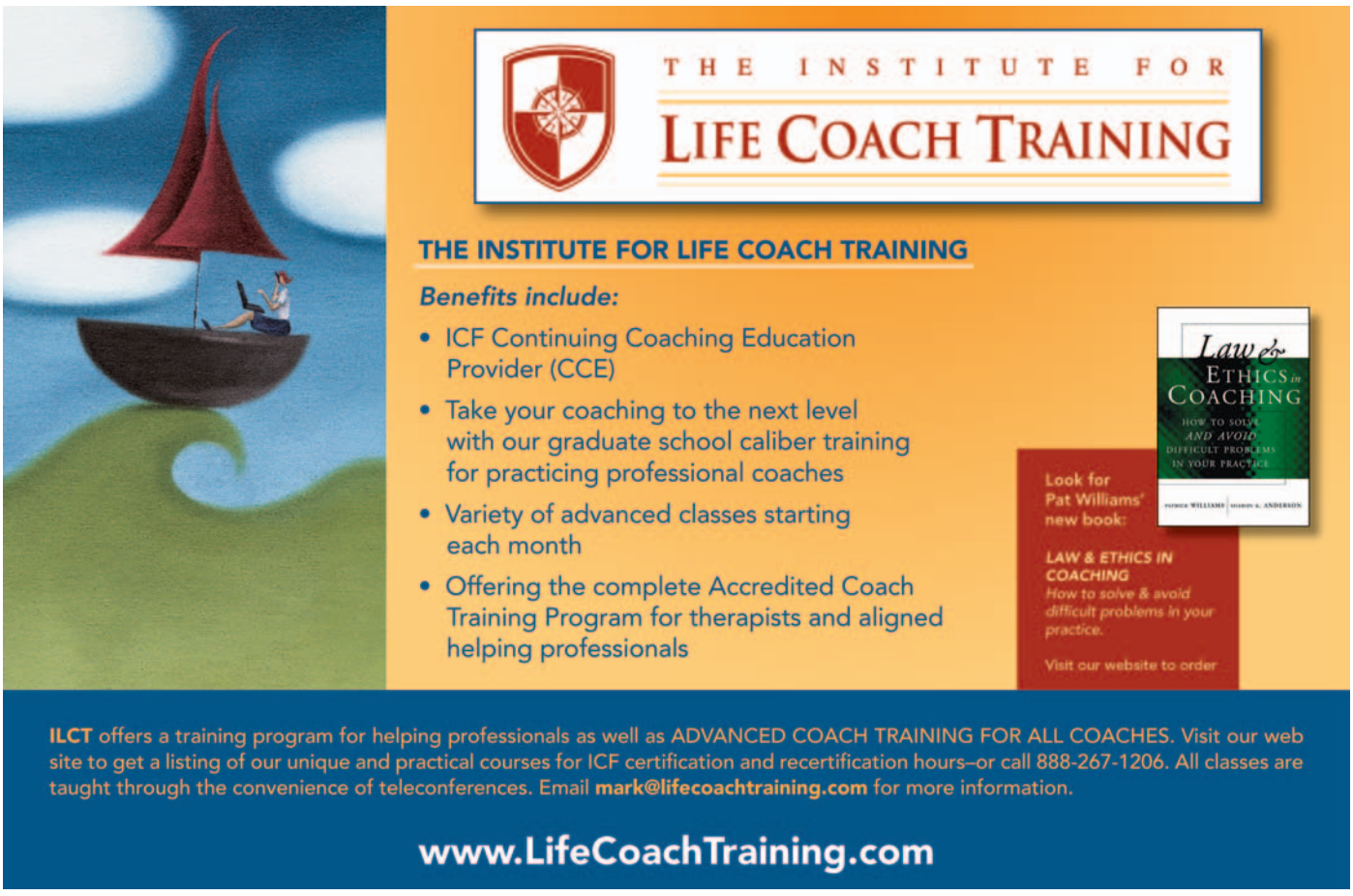
the actual learning of yoga is completely technical, which is to say it can be taught. We go to a yoga teacher and are shown the breathing and postural techniques to practice. While the depth of experience gained through doing yoga is unique to each individual, everyone has the technical capacity to learn how to do it. So it is with empathy. It's not magic, it's technical, and can be learned by any leader willing to apply effort and perseverance. In that sense developing empathetic awareness is no different from learning to ice skate or play the piano. The level of skill that one ultimately attains is dependent on many factors but everyone has the capacity to learn.

That being said, the ability on the part of my clients to learn is part and parcel with my ability as a coach to teach. As a coach I need to be constantly practicing and honing my own empathetic skills and teach first by demonstrating those skills in every coaching session. While it is by no means the only way of teaching empathy, the active listening that I demonstrate in session may well be the first experience that my clients have in actually relating empathetically to another.

Reflecting on experience

But beyond that if I want to coach my clients in developing empathy then I need to help them understand that the capacity to walk in another person's shoes presupposes their having taken the time to reflect on the experience of walking in their own. Empathy is after all based in shared experience, so if I am unaware of my own fears and anxieties how can I possibly attend to the experience of another in any meaningful way? When a person is struggling with their own discomfort the last thing they need is someone telling them the best way to fix it and make it go away. No matter how well intentioned, the belief that we have the answer that will fix the problem is almost always perceived as patronizing and only serves to make matters worse by increasing the emotional distance between the person struggling and the person trying to help.

And yet in business this is typically how most leaders attempt to deal



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with resistance. By acting as though they have the answer, leaders are dismissing the resistance (and, by extension, the anxiety of those expressing it) as baseless. The result is an ever-widening gulf between leaders and those they are attempting to lead. It is therefore critical that I help my clients understand the value of inner reflection in order that they can begin to see the world through the eyes of the other. It is in this sense that empathetic leadership begins, not with fixing, but with connecting to the uncertainty of others by honestly reflecting on our own.

Empathetic leadership is the willingness to actively engage in the human condition rather than choosing to be exempt from it. It means stepping out from behind a protective position of authority and acknowledging that we don't necessarily have the answers and that, though we may be optimistic, we also have concerns. But it takes a lot of courage for leaders to admit that they may have the same sorts of fears and anxieties as those they lead, because in allowing themselves to be seen as having uncertainty they become vulnerable. My aim is to help my clients see that it is this very vulnerability that draws others to trust them and inspires them to share and ultimately participate in their vision for change.

That resistance is a natural part of the change process and that empathy is the most effective means of response is a challenging proposition. As a coach it is all too easy for me to conjoin with my clients in the frustration they feel when faced with resistance. My natural impulse is to try and help them fix the problem by making it go away. But if I take that tack I am failing in my role as coach because problem solving is not, after all, what I do. My real job is to provide perspective. By challenging my clients to consider resistance in a new way I enable them to redefine their roles and achieve extraordinary results. •

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