

## COACHING: THE DANCE OF CHANGE AND RESISTANCE

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I learned my first lesson in coaching decades ago in a high school physics class. My teacher quoted from a textbook using these familiar words:

“For every force, there is an equal and opposing force.”

It is only now that I am beginning to understand the truth in this statement. There should be a statement like this in coaching instruction manuals for working with clients (not to mention our own self-development programs):

“For every change attempted, there will be resistance of equal magnitude.”

Thus begins the inevitable dance of change and resistance.

Integral Coaching® involves change. Let’s face it: clients don’t call us up saying, “Hey my life is going exactly how I want and I thought I’d hire a coach for the next six months to talk about how great things are in my world.” Coaches are hired by clients because they want to continue to grow and develop whether that involves huge breakthrough goals or meaningful contribution or integrating many years of wisdom on disparate paths into a new more integrated way of being in their lives. And always, yes always, change is involved; and the default way that people attempt to bring about change is by employing inordinate amounts of willpower without attending to the resistance that will naturally be present. This can often result in obtaining a short-term result without long-term integration of the desired change. Within months, after the short-term result has been attained, the client slips back into their old ways of being. Many pieces get left out of the sustainable development equation when willpower is the source for change and resistance isn’t actively explored.

Resistance is a natural biological function that shows up when our status quo is threatened. This is evident in our somatic structure: our immune system responds when a new virus or new organ is introduced into our bodies. There is no assessment that the body goes through to ask, “Is this a good change or a bad change?” There is just change. A new heart or liver or kidney now resides here and so there are drugs designed to help new organs counteract the physical resistance that the body will feel. Because whether it is good for us (a new healthy organ) or not so good for us (a serious virus), the physical response is to expel what is foreign, what is unknown, what is new. Period.

Similarly, in an organization – which is a complex social biological structural system - when change is introduced, resistance automatically follows. It is a given. Expect it. Prepare for it. We have all experienced organizational change initiatives that are introduced and quickly flame out and are shelved. This force is sometimes called the immune system of organizations - also known as corporate or organizational antibodies! Change threatens the status quo. It threatens what is reliable even if the current culture is not supporting personal or stated organizational intentions. It threatens what is safe

because 'safe' is known; change will always feel riskier than the status quo. Change is completely unknown while the status quo is familiar, known, and dependable.

At its most fundamental level, change threatens life as we know it. It threatens what can be relied on, what is present, what is already understood. Even if we don't like who we are or how we are being, or how others are, at least we know it. It is familiar. It is reliable. Change means something is going to be different or something is going to possibly die: our current ways, our current patterns, our predictability. It is inevitable. Something will be let go of, set down, or completed, in order to for something new to emerge. Something's gonna die. So, shouldn't we expect a little resistance?

Often we hear people talking about working with resistance from a place of willpower or mind over matter. This way of speaking suggests that what is required is some sort of inner drive or a strong enough stance to will ourselves through the period of trying to bring about something new. It can be a very harsh position to take and can be accompanied by disappointment or shame (depending on their interior condition) if someone's will isn't seen as strong enough. People ask, "Well, aren't you committed?" as though commitment were enough to push through, overcome, or fight through resistance; as though your commitment wasn't big enough or strong enough or clear enough. Other comments such as, "Just do it" or "You can do it. Just try harder" do not address nor attend to the deep connection of change and resistance.

Resistance lets us clearly know that we are trying on something new. It may be our first wonderful indicator that we are actually attempting some kind of change. If we push it away or get more forceful, committed, or strong, we distance ourselves from being able to effectively understand and work with our unique form of resistance and we unintentionally increase the pressure of the equal and opposing force.

Instead, we need to bring resistance in closer and not push it away. Trying to bring about change gives us the precious opportunity to experience kick back. Ah, something is going to die or perhaps, as my Integral nature says, "Something is about to get transcended and included. Pay attention."

In Integral Coaching®, one of the ways to bring resistance closer is to consciously inquire into our unique ways of changing and resisting. Consider a number of clients all attempting the same practice and notice their unique forms of resistance:

**PRACTICE:** To make more requests of others rather than always doing everything myself.

**Person A's Form of Resistance:**

I'll postpone making any requests of my colleagues and instead I'll lay the groundwork until I feel confident that they will say yes to me when I ask.

**Person B's Form of Resistance:**

What's the point of making requests, they won't do the job as well as I would.

**Person C's Form of Resistance:**

It is just easier to do it myself.

These three forms of resistance provide incredible insight into a client's unique way of perceiving themselves, their capabilities, others' competencies and their work situations. As Integral Coaches™, it gives us access to their AQAL Constellation and our job is to work with these very unique clients in different ways versus saying the same thing to each of them, "Just do it - I know you can" which is

asking them to employ will. Forcefully. You can do it. That isn't to say that willpower is not involved in change. It is. You need to draw on will to move forward but it is not the sole source for sustaining what is longed for by a client.

The key is to bring resistance close. Get familiar with its nuances, the stories it tells, and its strength. Writing in a coaching journal about new practices and related resistance that accompany the practice is a powerful way of getting close to and gaining understanding of resistance, its tales of woe, what it has allowed for in the past, and what it is closing down now. Reflective work is a critical component used to become familiar with our justifications, stories and unique ways of resisting change. And all the stories are true but they are partial; they are not the full truth.

Similarly, as our behaviours change, resistance or 'kick back' can also show up in the relationships surrounding us: our friends, family, and colleagues. Even when we are changing in ways that have us become more human, compassionate, and understanding, those around us may resist. Think about it.

A senior executive who was known to be really aggressive, blunt, even hurtful in the things she says started working with an Integral Coach™ because she wanted to become kinder, more open, more inclusive... and she actually started manifesting this new way of being through active practice and conscious reflection. What happened to people around her? Did they embrace her and welcome her efforts enjoying this healthier workplace? This is a real life example and this is how people responded: they started questioning between themselves: What's happened to her? What's up with her? What do you think she wants? What is she up to? Kick back. Full force.

There can be distrust of the 'new' even if it is welcomed. Why? Because it threatens the system that was previously understood and clear. People around her had become quite adept at knowing how to manage with, through and around her in a predictable way with consistent results. The leader's old behaviours were reliable and known and therefore, could even be considered safe due to their level of predictability. People knew exactly what to gripe about consistently. And now? They don't know what is going on, how to react, what to do.

A new force is felt.  
An equal and opposing force arises.

How do we prepare our clients for this type of resistance? The client (or any person who is attempting to change something) can choose to be direct with the people who will be affected by first letting them know what they are trying to do and that they will not be reliable at first - try not wobbling the first time you ride a bike! The coach can also work with the client to let them know that the system will kick back so that they are prepared for this natural occurrence. If clients are aware of these aspects of systemic response in advance, the reactions of those around them will be more quickly recognized and acknowledged as they emerge.

This method of working with resistance acknowledges that it is a natural part of the change process versus developing strategies to resist our resistance, strategies to wrestle our resistance to the ground and having it begging for release. In fact, resistance is a clear indication that we are on the path of change itself. It is a good sign.

How can we learn to rely on the presence of resistance as a healthy signpost along the way, as a natural part of the dance of change? Perhaps we can first get very familiar with our own forms of resisting.

Below please find a list of self-observation questions to consider in your own dance of change and resistance. As you come up with fresh New Year's Resolutions or start on a new path of action or start working with a coach, get familiar with your resistance through a reflective journal practice to accompany whatever you're taking on. And good luck! Watch for kick back; your own and others' and dance. It's all part of change.

**Daily Self-Observation and Journal Practice:**

1. When did I feel resistance today?
2. How did this resistance present itself in my body? My thoughts?
3. What were my judgments associated with the resistance? My feelings?
4. What was I most responding to?
5. What change was I resisting? (Having to change my mind or my view or my way of being? Having to drop my agenda, my way of seeing things? My new practice? This new idea?)
6. What am I most trying to keep intact?
7. What is required to let go of this grip to keep things safe?
8. What did I learn about my dance of change and resistance?

Any of these questions could be used (or personalized) for your own self-observation exercise. I would recommend working with no more than two of these items over a two week practice period.



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