

Dancing With Resistance

10 Intuitive
Leadership
Moves



Resistance is not inherently bad; something to be avoided.

Rather, it is inevitable...even desired. In the physical world the friction caused by resistance is required for there to be traction of any kind. Yet too much friction causes heat. Too much heat can cause an explosion. People and things we care about get hurt in explosions.

So my first invitation to you is to reframe your relationship with the idea of resistance. I'm not asking you to resign yourself to it. I'm asking you to reframe it as something necessary; something essential for providing the necessary diversity for more life in any system. Nature teaches us that this is the only way to adapt to changing conditions and, ultimately, to thrive.

Lesson #1: resistance is here to stay...and it may be your friend...if you embrace it's potential rather than trying to deny or eliminate it completely.

You can't defeat resistance but you can learn to dance with it.

Lesson #2: Leadership is first and foremost inner work—getting your own perspective clear and aligned. As you do, you'll more naturally act authentically and in ways that contributes to positive organizational culture.

Sounds simple, right?!

However, what gets in the way of this "simple" truth is the daily barrage of activities, tasks, meetings, and information overload. That leads to churn; to feeling like you're just shuffling paper and making little headway. Instinctively, you strive to make headway, hoping to be able to get your head above water so you've got time to think and look at the horizon.

Sadly, that time comes too infrequently. The rise of the daily swell lifts a new set of issues, tasks, meetings, and conversations. Your reactive focus is on the things happening around you.

Dutifully, you tend to those external things. Summoning your natural optimism, you try a new technique or set somebody new to the task or unbundle the big task and handle it in smaller chunks.

Same outcome. Different day. You're left feeling isolated and alone.

OK, perhaps that's a bit melodramatic and you're making more headway than that gloomy scenario? I certainly hope so.

I want more for you than to simply make it through another day. I want you to thrive; to feel fully

alive and aligned with your core goodness and your fullest competence. I want you to feel that you're acting at the peak of your creativity, poise, and promise. I want you to be interacting with your team in ways that lifts them and helps them align their own actions with their own inner leadership capacity.

To do so means going inside. Airline flight attendants tell us in every safety briefing to put on our own oxygen mask before helping others. Same applies to our own leadership journey. It's the inner work that more strongly influences outcomes than any of the technical tasks we can accomplish. As such, the conversation you're having with yourself is more important than any you're having externally.

So why does this feel so foreign?

Often the path to being recognized for one's leadership capability comes from a sustained pattern of solid task accomplishment. We get good at our work. We get stuff done. We get noticed. Then we get asked to lead.

No longer is it enough to be the person that knows how to get stuff done. No longer is it enough to be the person who has mastered the production technique or demonstrated a clear ability to hit the golden metrics.

Now the position requires you — as leader — to create the conditions for your teams to succeed at the highest levels. Your work now must foster reciprocal trust within the team, creating for each member a sense of personal agency and autonomy. In so doing, your team's collective impact is likely to be greater and their work more meaningful.

Who doesn't want that outcome? Nobody (duh!).

So what gets in the way of achieving it? Leaders get distracted by all the external moving pieces and fail to do their own inner work. What I mean by inner work is attention to the highest and best alignment of your values and your character — the well from which you draw your daily water. It's a clear-eyed look at removing your ego from your work — the self-protection against being "wrong" or hiding behind a power posture to assuage your fear of falling short.

Nourished by your inner practice, you're more likely to think and perform in truer alignment. And you'll be more likely to invite others into a similar clarity.

As that happens, a natural energy grows within you and among the team. Trusting one another's

best contribution, creativity increases. Ideas germinate and lots of small experiments produce a robust learning agenda. A shared sense of curiosity and deeper inquiry starts to happen, naturally leading team members to search for the good, the better, and the possible.

Who doesn't want that outcome? Nobody (duh!).

I invite you now to slow down.

Before reading further, commit to taking in these next ten suggestions not as a checklist or a to-do list. Perhaps you can think about each as a moving meditation—practicing new or forgotten dance steps.

Take one of these moving meditations into your conscious awareness each day for the next ten days. Likely you'll observe resistance coming from within and from outside you. Embrace it as natural and desirable.

There's no need to rush through what follows. More important is for you to internalize the suggestions (the "dance moves") below. After reading each, sit quietly to simply allow your rapid fire mind to produce the normal litany of reactions and possibilities. Recognize and ignore your impulse to immediately spring into action about the suggestion.

Simply "be" with the suggestion for a bit. Sound too fluffy? Perhaps. Nevertheless, give it a try. Be content to allow your mind to move beyond the first wave of impulsiveness—the desire to get quickly to the "doing" part of your leadership work. Sit quietly and hold in your mind the central intention of each of the following suggestions.

Some Prompts for Reflection

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What is the essence of the learning for you?

▪

In what ways does that central learning align with your core values and strengths?

▪

Think of a time when you may have demonstrated (and/or witnessed in other leaders) this central learning.

What was happening at the time?

What were the conditions that seemed to enable that positive story to unfold the way it did?

Resistance Dance Move #10



If you think you have the answer...you're probably wrong.

We're in a sustained period of upheaval. Assumptions about how the world works are dashed daily. Gone are the days of predictable stability and long business cycles and models. Reinvention thought leaders¹ warn that in a volatile, ambiguous, uncertain world having

only one right answer can kill you. Therefore, the best advice is to lead by asking questions, navigating your way by sensing the future potential of any present moment. Even a small set of balanced questions helps gain traction when the path is uncertain. Ask: What's working? What's hopeful? What's troubling? What's missing?

Sometimes it may feel like you're awash in "right answers" – yet no closer to making meaning for yourself or your team. Max Boisot² reminds us that "in a complex world plausibility is as powerful as truth. The shift from fragmentation to wholeness is about meaning." He emphasizes the importance of creating meaning in a complex world by connecting fragmented pieces of information. In such a world, plausibility can be as influential as truth, as people often base their decisions on the most coherent and convincing narratives available to them. When they can't see and trust a picture of wholeness, fragmentation leads to meaninglessness. The most effective leaders tell stories as a powerful way of making wholes from disparate parts and thus form a strong platform for sense-making, which guides action in a complex world.

¹ See the reinvention teaching and learning work of Dr. Nadya Zhexembayeva.

² Boisot was a British architect and management consultant who was professor of Strategic Management at the ESADE business school in Barcelona. He is best known for his ideas about the information economy, the Information Space, social capital, and social learning theory. His colleagues at the International Futures Forum introduced me to his writing.

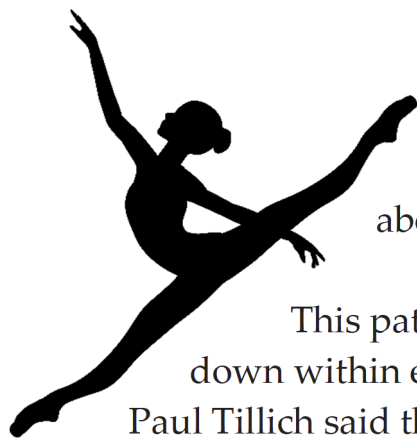
Therefore, storytelling becomes an essential skillset for leaders trying to dance with resistance. When your teams see only complexity and ambiguity, they're counting on you to weave together all the seemingly disconnected pieces of information into a clearer big picture. By weaving together disparate parts into a coherent whole, you can create a sense of meaning that helps guide actions and decisions.

Many of the most successful leaders tell me that while they feel like they don't possess a big, compelling, powerful vision, they are good at helping others make meaning of the present moment. By doing so, they are creating a compelling narrative, inspiring others to see the world from a different perspective, which then unleashes their own inner motivation to work toward shared goals.

Master this dance move and you will have moved from the compelling—yet hollow—search for the one right answer to something more sustainable: meaning and purpose.

Resistance Dance Move #9

We default to negative/deficit thinking...but we long for lift and purpose.



We often focus on what's wrong instead of what's right. We're used to comparing how things are to how we want them to be. When we have meetings, we usually talk about what's going wrong and what we're missing.

This patterned deficit thinking³ may be commonplace but deep down within each person is a longing for lift and purpose. Theologian Paul Tillich said that every living thing wants to become the best version of itself. Good leaders know they can help people feel this way by connecting them to

³ For a fascinating explanation of patterned deficit thinking, see Rosling, Hans (2018). Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World – and Why Things are Better Than You Think.

a purpose that's bigger than themselves. When people feel like they're part of something important, and that they can make a difference, they feel better. This positive feeling can spread to other people and make the whole environment feel better. You don't have to ignore or deny problems, but you can choose to focus on the good, the better, and the possible, and as you do, many current problems evaporate in the light of lift and purpose.

Resistance Dance Move #8



See the whole living system.

Imagine yourself as a leader who can see the big picture. You don't just focus on your own team or department - you see how everything is connected. You know that every action has an impact, and you understand the patterns of reinforcing and blocking forces that shape your world. You don't just rely on org charts or Zoom meeting participation to guide you. Instead, you see yourself as part of a larger network, where everyone is connected and interdependent.

You know that everything is constantly changing, and you're not afraid to adapt. You're open-minded, empathetic, and determined to make a difference. You understand that the more you ask big questions and act, the more the world will change in a positive way. You're not afraid of complexity, because you know that's where the real growth happens. You're a leader who puts purpose into action, and you inspire others to do the same.

Nature teaches us this is a dance of diversity and resilience.

Resistance Dance Move #7



**Leadership is a relationship
and every relationship a conversation.**

I've been saying this for years, marveling at the quizzical looks the statement evokes in my audiences. I keep trying to find alternative ways of saying it...but every alternative (even those from ChatGPT!) require many more words.

Let me break it down.

Resistance is a reaction or a response to something. Resistance can be expressed verbally and behaviorally. Resistance is neither inherently good nor inherently bad. It is colored by your projection onto it.

Conversation is a form of communication between two or more people in which they exchange information, ideas, or feelings through spoken words, written text, or other forms of expression. Effective conversations involve active listening, empathy, and respect for the perspectives of others, which can lead to better understanding, stronger connections, and the development of new ideas or solutions.

Dancing with resistance requires you to be in constant conversation with how the potential future is emerging in this present moment.⁴

First, for you to lead effectively, you've got to check your own internal conversation

⁴ If you'd like to go deeper into the concept of a very different nature of conversation, please [read](#) David Whyte's brilliant poem, *Everything is Waiting For You*, and/or [view](#) his TEDx talk, *Life at the Frontier: The Conversational Nature of Reality*. He lifts our imaginations to the undeniable, immutable interconnection of all things and what is produced by our projection of our strategic desires onto the world, the world's reaction to that, and the emerging possibility of that moment. He sees this as a **third frontier** of our understanding. I see it as an essential ingredient of leadership learning.

about the reality that's presenting itself to you. If you're being judgmental, cynical, and/or scared, you're blocking whatever is trying to emerge. Resistance grows here.

If you're opening yourself through curiosity, compassion, and courage (again, all as part of your internal conversation inside your own head), you're holding space for possibility. Better yet, you're holding space for a co-created possibility – between you and the other(s).

Now think about what it means to be *in relationship*. We've come to acknowledge (if not practice!) that communication, trust, and understanding are key elements in maintaining healthy relationships. These characteristics emerge from curiosity, compassion, and courage. They exist in your relationship with yourself (reflected in your self-talk), your relationships with colleagues (reflected in your conversations), and your relationship with the emerging future.

This is the intuitive wisdom you already possess IF you can quiet your inner chatter and talk truth to the power of your ego. If you meet all resistance with the same curiosity, compassion, and courage with which you form healthy relationships, perhaps then you can expect to see the possibility of improved communication, deepening trust, and reciprocal understanding.

Each conversation you have holds the seeds of the emerging future. As a leader, you can invite this future possibility more fully through questions of discovery, free of judgment, and attentive to the real-time learning unfolding before you. "These are the ordinary, everyday processes of organizational life that offer endless opportunity as we move from conversation to conversation."⁵

Leadership is a relationship and every relationship a conversation .

⁵ Shaw, Patricia, (2002). Changing Conversations in Organizations, Routledge, (p. 71)

Resistance Dance Move #6



Fear (aka, control) and love (aka, participation) are the source of most issues you face.

You'll notice that I haven't been talking about your technical knowledge and the solutions they enable. That's

intentional. Rather, I believe that the most issues you face in leading others revolves around the human interaction.

So let's dig in to that a bit further. When you strip away the layers of organizational behavior you experience, consider that its source is often either fear (expressed as control) or love (expressed as participation). These are ways of not just being in the work and the world, they are ways of knowing (experiencing) the work and the world.

Fear/control tries to eliminate variance in search of predictability. This kind of behavior (sometimes enculturated in whole teams and organizations) is the act of managing, directing, or influencing situations, people, or oneself to achieve specific outcomes or maintain a sense of stability and predictability. Control can manifest in various ways, such as self-discipline, decision-making, or attempting to influence the actions of others. While exercising control can be necessary and beneficial in certain situations, excessive controlling behavior can be harmful to relationships and personal well-being. The greater the grip of control, the lower the flexibility and adaptability. When this behavior is widespread people can feel objectified and, ultimately, alienated, which demands even more control of one's environment. A reinforcing cycle of anxiety, insecurity, and fear results.

Alternatively, love/participation relishes diversity and seeks to dance with the unfolding nature of reality. This fosters a sense of belonging, which reinforces the motivation to participate. Love, empathy, compassion, and relationship are the

drivers of such a reinforcing cycle.⁶ Fostering love and participation as part of organizational culture can lead to several benefits for both the organization and its members:

- *Enhanced collaboration:* Love and participation foster a supportive and inclusive environment where employees feel encouraged to collaborate, share ideas, and work together towards common goals.
- *Increased employee engagement:* When employees feel valued and respected, they're more likely to be engaged, committed, and motivated to contribute their best work.
- *Improved employee retention:* A positive, loving, and participatory work environment can reduce turnover by increasing job satisfaction and making employees feel more connected to the organization.
- *Better problem-solving and decision-making:* A culture that encourages participation and values diverse perspectives can lead to more effective problem-solving and decision-making, as employees are more likely to share their unique insights and ideas.
- *Higher levels of trust:* Love and participation can help build trust among team members, which is crucial for effective teamwork, open communication, and a strong sense of belonging.
- *Enhanced creativity and innovation:* A supportive and participatory culture can foster creativity and innovation, as employees feel empowered to explore new ideas and take risks without fear of judgment or failure.
- *Greater adaptability and resilience:* Organizations that promote love and

⁶ Many notable authors have explored these concepts, among them Paul Tillich, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Adam Kahane. A tip of my hat to Graham Leicester, who first introduced me to this concept in his book, *Transformative Innovation: A Guide to Practice and Policy for System Transition* (2020). My most recent best pick is Michelle Hunt's, *Love: The Core Leadership Value and Organizing Principle for Business and Society*, in Cooperrider, D. and Selian, A. editors (2022), *The Business of Building a Better World: The Leadership Revolution That Is Changing Everything*.

participation are more likely to be adaptable and resilient in the face of change, as employees feel supported and involved in the decision-making process.

- *Positive organizational reputation:* A culture that embraces love and participation can attract top talent and create a positive reputation for the organization, making it a desirable place to work.

Resistance Dance Move #5



Leadership is first and foremost inner work.

I think this bears reinforcement so I wanted to add a bit more to what I said in the introduction about your inner work.

We're taught that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. However, the most adaptive leaders know that shifting culture and building cooperative capacity for lift and innovation requires something other than the conventional linear approach. This different approach includes your own process of "letting go," a process of opening at three levels: mind, heart, and will. As your conscious awareness shifts and opens, your language begins to shift. As your language shifts, your behavior follows. In appreciative inquiry we learn that we move in the direction of what we attend to most closely. If you attend to this conscious opening, you'll more successfully and authentically move in this direction.

One of the hardest leadership lessons you must learn is that your ability to foster change around you is directly connected to your posture toward change within you. As a leader you have a responsibility to understand your own inner place and condition—the source from which you operate unconsciously—and its impact on where you place your attention and what choices you make. When approached

with authenticity and intention, love becomes the driving force behind your work.. From that posture, you'll be helping individuals and the whole organization grasp reality and connect the seemingly disconnected pieces into a sensible, coherent whole.

Resistance Dance Move #4



Practice the 'double task' of reflecting while doing.

Action without awareness and reflection is just activity. The 'double task' is your ability to be in the moment (participating in the activity) and observing the moment (drawing immediate conclusions from participation). Your increased ability to do so signals how well you can adjust and adapt. Some believe this learning style is the beginning of wisdom and mastery.⁷

The exploding global interest in reinvention skills is clear evidence that the most successful leaders will be those who possess this skillset.

Why might this be important for you?

Because the levels of uncertainty and complexity you're experiencing today will be around indefinitely (?? who really knows??). Therefore, you'll be called upon repeatedly to anticipate change, design your organizational response to it, and then implement the design. Margins will be thin and risks plentiful. That necessitates you learn to learn differently so you can lead differently.

⁷ In their insightful book, *Dancing at the Edge: Competence, Culture, and Organization in the 21st Century* (2019, 2nd Edition), Maureen O'Hara and Graham Leicester describe these characteristics as evidence of psychological literacy. According to the authors, it involves a capacity to read and own one's psychological response to challenge and to become master of that response rather than its victim (p. 21).

Resistance Dance Move #3



Understand the real challenge at hand.

Here again I'm asking you to pause for a bit of reflection before you jump feet-first into problem solving action mode. Unless you're in imminent crisis, you've got a little time for reflection.

First, ask yourself if the issue you're facing is a technical or an adaptive challenge? A technical challenge can be resolved from the known, technical array of solutions often found in "best practices."

However, if you sense there's little or no precedent to the issue you're facing, you've got an adaptive challenge on your hands. These are tougher and more complex, requiring real-time learning and experimentation. You're no doubt sensing more of these types of challenges today as the speed of change increases and trusted reliance on "the way we've approached it before" isn't getting you the results you want. You have to hold loosely your familiar mental models about why and how things work to solve adaptive challenges.

Second, ask yourself if what you're really facing is a problem for which a solution can be implemented that resolves the issue for good. In the current environment, despite your best efforts at problem solving, issues seem to reappear like a swinging pendulum. In these instances, you're facing a polarity, defined as the combination or harmonization of two seemingly opposite states that must coexist over time for success to occur. This happens far more often than you may realize. A couple simple examples are right brain-left brain thinking, centralized-decentralized organizations, task focused-person focused, etc.).

You can't approach an organizational or team polarity as if it were a problem to be solved. All you can do is learn a new way to navigate and manage the opposite states, forever in a fragile balance. Failing to learn the difference leads to endless

pendulum swinging fueled by the vocal proponents of each pole.

Is it a technical or an adaptive challenge? Am I dealing with a problem or a polarity?

Determining the right question to ask and answer is paramount.

Resistance Dance Move #2



Plan less. Experiment more.

Processes that we used to see as cyclical or episodic reflect attitudes and systems born of an earlier era where change was occasional rather than constant. Now, the two most likely variables facing leaders are:

- 1) the degree of uncertainty, and
- 2) the likelihood of disagreement.

Today, plans are obsolete long before you've enabled all the key stakeholders to weigh in. Instead of cementing in place multi-year plans, you'll need to shift mindsets, language, and processes toward rapid prototyping. Treat these as experiments, which invites curiosity and far less judgment. When you say you have a plan, you unconsciously signal that you've stopped asking questions and you're solely focused on execution. That's an unintended barrier to learning and adaptation.

Listen, experiment, learn, modify, and repeat.

To lead effectively in this reality you need to be present in the moment; foster connectivity and promote diversity; challenge habits and assumptions; lessen differences in authority and power; increase information flows; and foster the conditions for innovation and renewal. Keep the dance going.

Resistance Dance Move #1



Relentlessly and unapologetically look for the true, the better, the possible.

The most effective leaders I know are singularly focused on discovering what brings more life to the system when it's at its very best. They are what Robert Quinn refers to as "bilingual" – able to recognize and navigate the constraints of conventional organizational design and practice while at the same time modeling for others a positive organization mindset.⁸

He writes,

*When we orient to the whole and pursue the best emerging future, we are embracing the highest good and the collective good. As Thoreau suggests [in his 1849 essay *Civil Disobedience*], when we make such a choice, a split occurs within us and a better self emerges. It is a self of greater purpose, integrity, empathy, and learning. It is our truest self (p. 81).*

Being genuinely curious about root causes of success and high point moments

⁸ See Robert E. Quinn (2015), *The Positive Organization: Breaking Free from Conventional Cultures, Constraints, and Beliefs*

pulls one's attention to ever-deeper inquiry, going well beyond the easier-to-spot activity to the conditions that made it possible. By modeling this mindset and behavior, you create a learning community—an inquiry driven posture toward the work. When discovering those root conditions of success, it's then easier to ask how we might elevate and extend those conditions moving forward. The result is cascading lift of the entire system.

Success is not just the product of good strategy, it's the natural result of **illuminating and amplifying** life-giving forces.



Hi there, I'm Gary.

I've been lucky to make a career out of doing what I love (hint, NO, it's not playing air guitar).

Rather, it's guiding leaders and teams through change, adaptation, inflection, and resourcing the futures they most want to see.

To this very day, I'm ever curious about the future that is trying to emerge...if only we can pause to see it, sense it, and coax it forward.

Say hello, why don't you...and let me know what you want to reframe.

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