

Chapter 3

Coping With Resistance and Fear of Failure

- From the Group
- From Yourself
- From the Top
 - Scenario 3: Resistance from an Authority Figure
- The Resistance Diagram
 - Scenario 4: Resistance Breeds Resistance
- Resistance is Forever

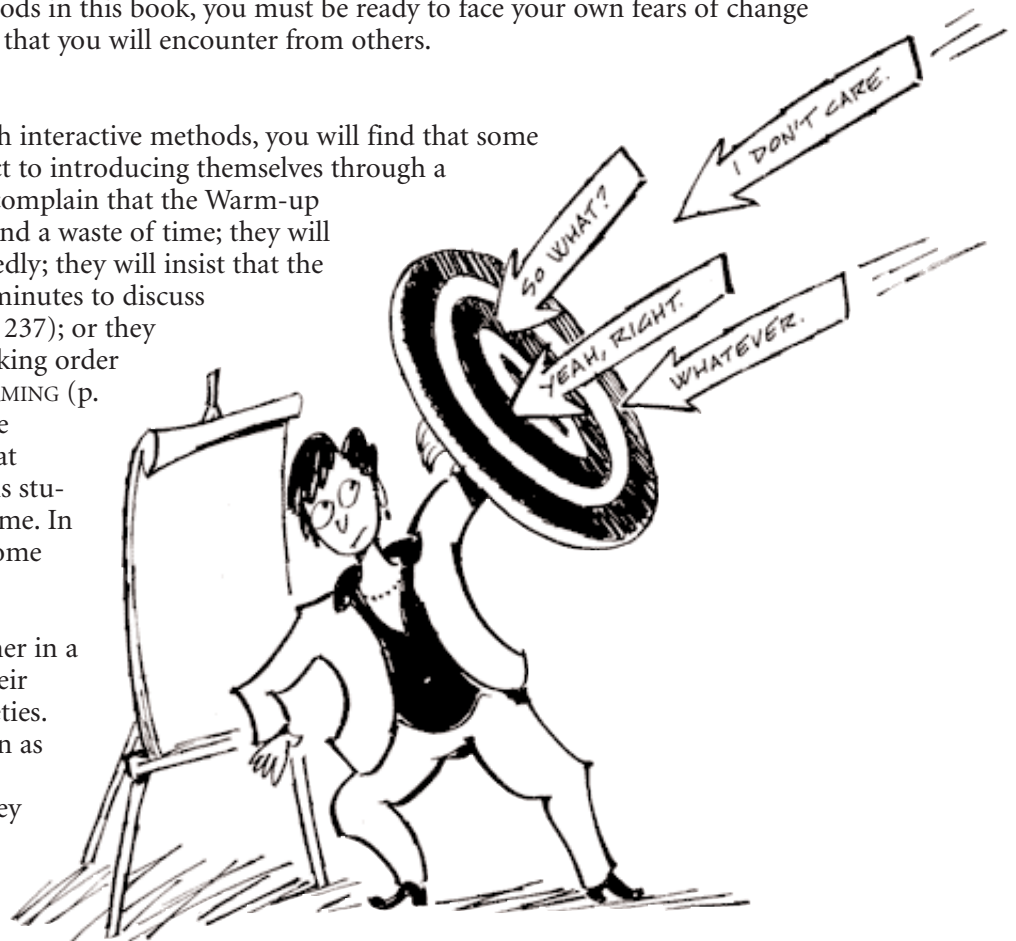
If you have ever tried to change a longstanding personal habit, you know that the force of habit is a powerful thing. Change inevitably meets with resistance, and you need courage, persistence, and belief in what you are doing to overcome it.

The kind of meeting we are all used to is like a longstanding habit. When you begin using interactive methods to create real change in the old structures, you will encounter resistance from all directions: from the group you're working with, from yourself, and from those who control your working environment. To use the methods in this book, you must be ready to face your own fears of change and the natural resistance that you will encounter from others.

From the Group

As you begin working with interactive methods, you will find that some group members will object to introducing themselves through a Name Exercise; they will complain that the Warm-up Question is unnecessary and a waste of time; they will participate only halfheartedly; they will insist that the group cannot afford five minutes to discuss an issue in PAIRING (see p. 237); or they will try to ignore the speaking order or the rules for BRAINSTORMING (p. 385). You may feel that the group members think what you're asking them to do is stupid, silly, and a waste of time. In fact, this is exactly what some will be thinking.

When people come together in a group, each person has their own set of fears and anxieties. While they want to be seen as intelligent and as valuable members of the group, they are fearful that other group members won't accept them or appreci-



ate what they have to offer. Interactive techniques ask people both to look inside themselves and to take a step toward others; they are vehicles for opening people up, for surfacing feelings, and for moving past inhibitions. Most people want to experience this opening, but they are fearful and ambivalent about it. Therefore, they aim those negative feelings toward the safest target they can find, which is usually the facilitator.

In addition, there are a few people who actually thrive on dysfunctional meetings. People who are more aggressive and outgoing and have no problem speaking their minds are usually able to dominate the action and impose their own will on the outcome of a group process. Some of these people may be highly resistant to an interactive meeting structure that brings in everyone's voices.

Also, people's past experiences with "icebreakers" may be a significant source of the resistance that you encounter. Some may have enjoyed doing this type of exercise and are willing to try the interactive approach. Others, however, may feel they had been forced to do things that made them feel silly, and they don't know why the exercises were done or what anyone gained from doing them. When the group leader has not connected the exercises to the group's work, some people conclude that all experiences of this type are a waste of time. Furthermore, meetings that begin with "icebreakers" often raise people's expectations that everyone's ideas will be welcomed; when these meetings then proceed in a top-down style with no further opportunities for interaction or participation, some people develop a cynical dislike of all interactive exercises.

These are legitimate reactions to situations where the group facilitation was heavy-handed, the purpose of the exercise was not clear, or the purpose was to provide a false sense of camaraderie. These experiences have left a meeting landscape littered with people who have a knee-jerk, hostile reaction to the idea of "icebreakers." However, the *Moving Beyond Icebreakers* approach is completely different from these experiences because:

- The exercises are not pointless. They grow out of the goals of the meeting and are chosen to help the group meet its goals.
- The Interactive Meeting Format welcomes participation and input throughout the meeting, not just during the initial exercises.

Nevertheless, groups that are new to the interactive approach will assail you with various forms of resistance. In order to meet and counter the resistance, you need to be clear about your purpose, determined to build a structure in which everyone is heard, and well-grounded in the Interactive Meeting Format.

From Yourself

When the group is resistant, inexperienced facilitators often feel their resolve slipping away. They may react with nervousness and lack of conviction in explaining an exercise, a half-hearted implementation of the exercise, or abandonment of the interactive agenda and a speedy retreat to a more familiar format.

It is your first job, as you learn to be an effective facilitator of interactive meetings, to recognize and work through your own fears and resistance. If you do not do this, you will be unable to address the fears and resistance of those you are working with, and the many benefits of interactive work will be unavailable to your group.

It is not easy to work through your own resistance and then go on to work through the resistance of



the group. In the beginning you may have to take it on faith that interactive techniques will bring great benefits to the groups you work with. However, as you persevere in overcoming your resistance and as you acquire greater skill with interactive techniques, you will begin to see concrete results, including deep changes in individuals' behavior and significant increases in a group's ability to make decisions and work effectively together.

The willingness to take risks, ask questions, and make mistakes is a requirement for the development of expertise.¹ *Deborah Meier*

Nevertheless, you will find that the voice of resistance within yourself is persistent and full of ideas. Here is some of what the voice will whisper to you:

I shouldn't do this exercise because:

- Some members of the group are too old.
- Some members of the group are too young.
- I'll look foolish.
- We can't move the table out of the way.

¹Deborah Meier, *In Schools We Trust* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 14.

COPING WITH RESISTANCE AND FEAR OF FAILURE

- The room is set up wrong.
- It's too hot.
- It's too much trouble to move the chairs into place.
- Someone will get hurt.
- I'll look foolish.
- I don't know what to say.
- It will be easier to skip it and just move on with the agenda.
- People are feeling relaxed. They don't need to do interactives.
- This group already has a lot to say. They don't need to do interactives.
- This group is getting along very well. They don't need to do interactives.
- This exercise is too high-risk.
- This is the wrong exercise for right now.
- I'll look foolish.
- This exercise is too silly.
- The group will think this is childish.
- I'll do it next time.
- What if they won't do it?
- We don't have time.
- What if it takes too much time?
- I'm not prepared to process it well (lead a discussion).
- I'll look foolish.

Sometimes, of course, the voice will be raising a good point. You should always listen to your inner voice and examine its claim. Perhaps the exercise you've planned *is* too high-risk for this group, or perhaps there *is* reason to fear that someone could get hurt. The skill you need to develop is to distinguish between the voice of resistance and the voice of reason. You also need to remember that the group experience is not about your own comfort. (So what if you look foolish!) It's about creating an effective environment for the group to meet its goals.

From the Top

Interactive methods open up communication and give group members a real voice in problem-solving and decision-making. For those who believe that the best answers come from a process where everyone is heard, this is a welcome approach. However, it is difficult to implement an interactive decision-making process in an organization based on the belief that decisions are best made at the top.

Because interaction opens up dialogue and brings more voices into the discussion, it tends to bring out intense resistance from entrenched centers of power that seek to maintain control, even when the cost of that control is continued dysfunction and inability to meet the organization's mission. The greatest source of resistance to interactive methods comes from those who believe in authoritarian leadership and have an underlying agenda of maintaining their positions of power and control. Often this resistance will be cloaked in complaints about "no time for games" or "getting touchy-feely."

Chapter 1 describes how interactive methods contribute to a group's effectiveness and productivity. In order to achieve the benefits of a process in which everyone in a group is free to contribute their thoughts and ideas, those in leadership positions need to cede some of their power and control to the group. They need to be ready to let people speak, to hear what they say, and to act based on what they hear.



Scenario 3: Resistance from an Authority Figure

Sharon and Marcus, counselors at an urban high school, wanted to help students overcome the anxiety that was contributing to their poor performance on a high-stakes standardized test. They devised an interactive lesson plan for this purpose, which they conducted in each of the school's test-preparation classes. (See p. 118 for more on this lesson plan.) The first few times they ran these sessions, the agenda generated discussion, reflection, and focus from the participants, and the sessions were deemed successful by all.

In Ms. Smith's class, however, though the students were disciplined and seemed to be listening, they would not open up and participate. Throughout the session, students were nervous, tense, and not willing to talk more than necessary. In response to the Warm-up Question "How are you feeling right now?" students answered "Fine" or "OK." The Wordstorm on "success" failed to yield any real discussion, whereas students in earlier sessions had been passionate and engaged on this subject. The facilitators found themselves struggling to fill out the 80-minute period; in other classes they had come close to running out of time.

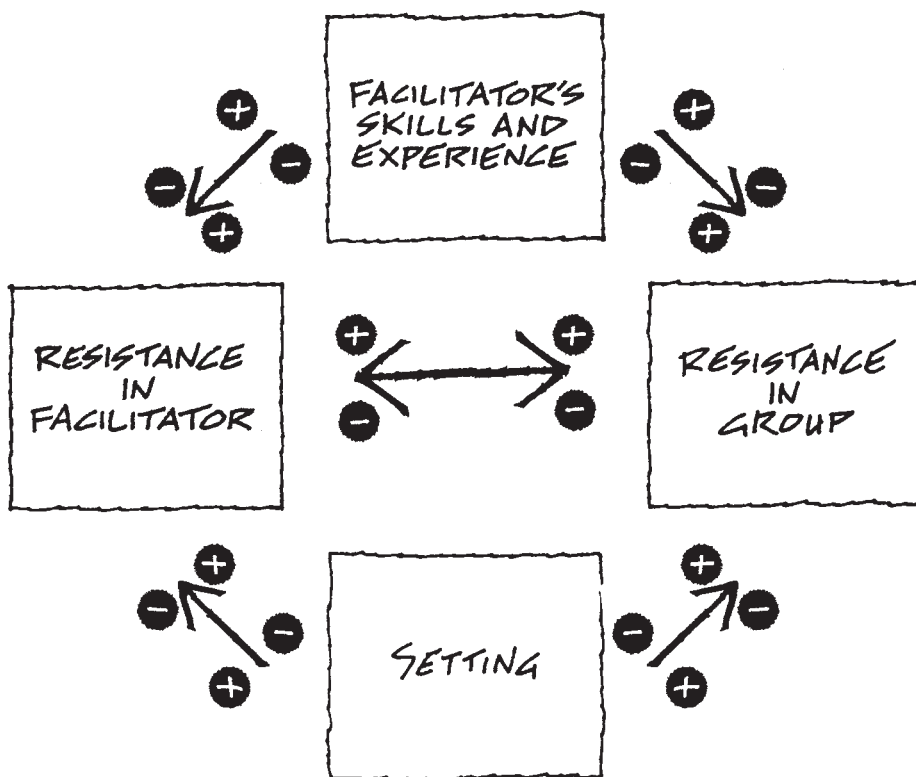
Sharon and Marcus soon realized that the problem lay with Ms. Smith; she was the only one of the test-prep teachers who had been negative about the idea of these sessions and had not wanted her class to participate. However, with ten minutes remaining in the session, Ms. Smith left the room to attend to some business. Sharon then asked the class if there was anything they wanted to say while the teacher was not present. The class opened up and began to discuss the conflicting emotions and high levels of stress that they were feeling around the test. With the powerful presence of a resistant authority figure removed, students were able to make some progress toward

grappling with the anxieties that were hindering their motivation and holding them back from success on the test.

In this case, the force of the students' feelings was strong enough to eventually overcome the negativity of a resistant authority figure. In less charged circumstances, however, resistance from the top often wins the day entirely, pre-empting all dialogue and interactivity.

The Resistance Diagram

To deal with resistance successfully, it helps to be aware of some of the factors influencing the level of resistance you and the group experience, and to understand the dynamic relationship among these factors. The Resistance Diagram illustrates these relationships.



The Facilitator's Resistance and the Group's Resistance. When someone in the role of facilitator has a high level of resistance to the use of interactive methods, this feeds the group's own natural resistance. Increased resistance from the group, in turn, increases the level of resistance in the facilitator. If this is happening to you, you need to break the cycle by recognizing your growing resistance for what it is. If you don't do this, you may find that the group's resistance will reinforce your own resistance until you abandon the effort to learn this new skill and accept the notion that interactive methods are silly, stupid, and a waste of time. See scenario 4 for an example of how resistance breeds resistance.

On the other hand, someone coming to the role of facilitator with a high level of commitment to working interactively is much better able to overcome the resistance in the group. The ability to deal with resistance while maintaining an attitude of confidence in what you are doing is probably the largest factor in determining the degree to which interactive methods will be successful in your group.

Scenario 4: Resistance Breeds Resistance

Robin was a high school teacher and had just assumed the position of faculty advisor to the student government. For the first meeting of the 16 newly elected class officers, Robin created an agenda that began with learning names and helping people get to know each other before moving on to discussing the work of the student government.

After a brief introduction, Robin asked the group to do *NAME CHANT AND MOTION* (p. 135). In this exercise, everyone takes a turn saying their name while making a motion. The entire group then repeats that person's name and does their motion three times.

As Robin explained the exercise, she noticed questioning stares from group members. She started to feel self-conscious in her role as facilitator, and to doubt the appropriateness of the exercise. She tried to reassure herself and the group by giving an example of the kind of motion someone might make. But as she gave a brief demonstration, her face got red, she laughed nervously, and her embarrassment was evident. The group responded with nervous laughter of their own. Not surprisingly, when Robin asked who would like to go first, no one volunteered. Although she muddled her way through the rest of the exercise, it was a painful experience for everyone involved.

Robin's lack of confidence with using interactive techniques had undermined her ability to present the exercise as fun and non-threatening. She had responded to the initial resistance of the group by becoming overwhelmed with her own resistance and fear of looking foolish. Her body language clearly communicated to the group that she felt silly doing this, and that if they did it they would probably look and feel silly, too.

Robin has since become confident in her role as a facilitator and she is comfortable using interactive techniques with student groups and others. She has used *NAME CHANT AND MOTION* successfully in many different settings, and she has learned to break through a group's initial resistance by using humor and by modeling that the exercise is fun and safe.

There are two other important factors that influence the level of resistance in the group and the facilitator:

- **The Setting.** The more comfortable the setting, the fewer reasons anyone has to feel resistant. When people are at ease, when they know that the meeting space is private, and when other elements of an ideal setting are in place, everyone is more relaxed and willing to try new things. Conversely, when the meeting space is cramped, noisy, or lacking in privacy, these factors increase everyone's discomfort and make people more resistant to working interactively. See p. 53 for a discussion of the ideal setting and how to provide it.
- **The Facilitator's Skills and Experience.** The more experienced you are with interactive methods

and the more confident you are in your skills, the more you are able to relax and to communicate a relaxed attitude to the group. This means, of course, that when you are new to interactive methods and unsure of your skills, you are more likely to feel resistant to trying out your new skills in public and more likely to communicate a sense of insecurity, which tends to foster resistance in the group.

The best antidote for inexperience in the short term is to be thoroughly familiar with the contents of this book, especially chapter 5. All the information and suggestions in that chapter will build your confidence, thereby decreasing your resistance. In particular, you will find it helpful to practice giving the instructions for the exercises in advance; if you are not worried about getting the information right, your comfort level will be dramatically increased, which will help put the group at ease.

In the long term, consistent use of the Interactive Meeting Format will dissolve the group's resistance both by honing your facilitation skills and by making the interactive approach familiar and comfortable to the group members. Using interaction sporadically or inconsistently actually serves to increase the group's resistance. Consistency is a major contributing factor to success.

Resistance is Forever

Resistance in the group and in yourself never goes away. Working interactively is not easy, and ingrained habits usually lurk inside us waiting for opportune moments to reassert their control. If you are committed to an interactive approach, you need to be continually aware of the need to confront and disperse resistance.

While it's impossible to predict when and where resistance will rise to the surface, some of the exercises in this book are more likely than others to call up resistance from the group, and some of these are noted with the "Resistance" icon.

Getting a grip on resistance, no matter what its source, will make it possible for you to run groups that serve their intended purposes and are vibrant, engaging, and productive.

