

Resistance to Change: Responses

Traditionally, we think of resistance to change as something people do to avoid a threat or minimize a perceived loss of value. We used to see resistance as an effort to oppose, negate, or block progress. Thanks to new science, we now know it is a lot more nuanced than that. In fact, many aspects of resistance happen to people, often blocking them from being able to achieve things they want.

Here is a quick comparison between common behaviors and responses we traditionally consider as resistance to change, and other common resistance responses that block people, which we often miss or overlook because they are not part of our traditional definition of resistance. While the entire list is helpful, the invisible versions may be of particular interest as they are much less commonly considered resistance and, as a result, are much more likely to block success.

Take a look at the following list. Ask yourself - which of the following, if any, applies to your past or current clients?



Common Resistance Responses

*Examples of behaviors, actions, and thinking patterns which are typically **identified and addressed** as resistance to change:*



“Know it all” – Typical examples:

- Not paying attention to explanations, opinions, or details because too busy focusing on what I know.
- Being knowledgeable is protection against things I don't want to do.
- Quick to jump to conclusions.
- Not listening attentively.



Invisible Resistance Responses

*Examples of behaviors, actions, and thinking patterns which are often **missed and not addressed** as resistance to change:*



Confusion, distraction, disorientation – Typical examples:

- Missing details.
- Misunderstanding instructions.
- Being unaware of certain decisions or guidelines, despite being present.

Common Resistance Responses



Not making time – Typical examples:

- “I didn’t have time.”
- “I had more urgent things to complete.”
- “I had more important things to do.”



Argumentativeness – Typical examples:

- Disagreement in order to protect status quo.
- “We shouldn’t do it that way...”
- “I know how it is, and you don’t.”
- Intense sense of right and wrong with very little room for gray areas.

(not all disagreement is argumentative!)



Defiance – Typical examples:

- “I have no intention of doing that.”
- Insisting on things just because that’s the way we’ve always done it or for other unrelated considerations.
- Suspicious of change processes.
- Angry when not getting what I want.

Invisible Resistance Responses



Impatience and jumping to action – Typical examples:

- Acting before fully understanding the situation, other opinions, or even the desired outcome.
- Panicking or otherwise having extreme responses to potential, minor, problems before getting the details or having enough information.
- Shifting quickly from one solution or approach to another to move things faster.
- Wanting to see results immediately or very quickly even when processes need to take time.



Rigidity and inflexibility – Typical examples:

- Discomfort with unpredictability of processes and wanting to move forward in clear straight lines.
- Short-term, immediate focus.
- Motivated from a place of “should” and “must”.
- “We’ve made a decision and need to stick with it” (even when circumstances change).



Insufficient Introspection:

- Inability to recognize I feel angry, frustrated, afraid etc.
- Struggling to recognize and process emotions like fear, which leads to an inability to respond effectively to discomfort and disagreement.
- Insisting on being wronged when in fact unwilling to have basic open conversations.

Common Resistance Responses



Dismissiveness – Typical examples:

- Eliminating options to move forward without offering an alternative.
- “That’s the right way to do it.”
- If something doesn’t make sense to me, it’s wrong.
- Skeptical.



Defensiveness – Typical examples:

- Quick to critique everything and everyone but don’t appreciate being critiqued.
- Deflecting and explaining why things that happen are not my fault.
- Not wanting to own reality, changing facts to fit my perspective.
- Inability to “contain” other people’s negative thoughts or feelings and a desire to move away quickly from negative experiences.



Controlling – Typical examples:

- Wanting to eliminate unknowns.
- Frustration that comes from the need to have greater control.
- May try to get what I want even if it means lying or being offensive and insensitive to others.

Invisible Resistance Responses



Perfectionism – Typical Examples:

- Imposing unrealistically high standards and expectations on self and/or others.
- Avoidant because not wanting to disappoint, be disappointed, or be rejected.
- Negative or diminishing self-talk, self-criticizing perspective around making mistakes, and fear of failure.
- Not starting new projects or efforts to avoid failure.



Procrastination – Typical examples:

- Struggling to focus on long term benefit in the face of short term discomfort.
- Difficulty to initiate and start new efforts.
- Must have all the pieces clearly outlined before acting or taking steps forward.
- Frequently waiting for something else to happen before taking a new step.



Talkativeness – Typical examples:

- “Did I tell you about the time that...” (when examples frequently distract from making progress).
- Making jokes and changing the subject when sensitive issues come up.

Common Resistance Responses



Apathy and avoidance – Typical examples:

- Letting others talk about change, not expressing disagreement, but not acting or engaging in the effort.
- Agreement is surface deep only.
- Doing the absolute bare minimum.
- Evasive and otherwise non-confrontational. May avoid cooperating by not sharing any specific thoughts or having direct, open conversations.



Deferring responsibility – Typical examples:

- Passive, withdrawn, emotionally detached.
- Struggling to make choices or recognize what the right decisions for themselves.
- Not trusting myself.
- Indecisive, changing my mind often, easy to agree with everything.
- May shut down or freeze as a result of conflict or other stressors.
- Repressing my own needs and what I care about to accommodate the needs and wants of others.
- May be overly optimistic and quick to move on from disagreement, anger, or frustration to avoid staying in dissonance or experiencing discomfort of threat.
- Reducing the sense of urgency or need for change.



Narrow individual perspective – Typical examples:

- feeling sorry for myself.
- It's all about me.
- Not seeing the impact of actions, systemic dynamics, and considerations from a strategic perspective.
- Angry or frustrated that not consulted or involved when in fact are feeling entitled and involving me was not necessary.



Staying in exploration mode – Typical examples:

- Eager to talk about what I'm thinking and feeling.
- Focusing on what's wrong with me or with others around me.
- Exploring the problem, diving deeper and deeper.
- Asking endless questions that may initially seem introspective and open but may be a protective mechanism to avoid moving from exploration to taking action.

Common Resistance Responses



Aggressive and manipulative – Typical examples:

- Quick to lose my temper.
- Speaking loudly, yelling, blocking physical space, or otherwise creating a sense of threat or power to try to get what I want.
- Using feelings like being hurt to manipulate others.
- Spinning situations and what people say to serve my purposes.



Emotionally “Hijacked” – Typical examples:

- Quick, extreme emotional responses.
- Jumping to conclusions.
- Excitable and can get very passionate and dramatic about things I believe in and things I don’t agree with.
- Have intense emotional responses and interactions.
- Often controlled by my emotions rather than the other way around.
- Often oscillate between feeling angry and feeling hurt.
- Struggle to think clearly or talk logically when upset.
- May be using exaggerated descriptions, and talking in superlatives.

- How many of these have you seen come up run into in your work with clients in the past?

A new understanding of resistance allows us to see a much wider range of resistance responses to change. This makes it possible for us to quickly identify additional resistance responses and better support people to overcome them.

Overcoming resistance can be done by providing people with new skills (so they can cope more effectively with discomfort), creating an effective accountability structure, and establishing an effective environment of communication and trust.

We’d love to hear your insights about the above and please feel free to reach out to ask for greater clarity about it all, or to ask us about identifying and overcoming resistance in a specific situation.

With deepest appreciation,

Reut and the KCI Team