

"How Can I Coach a Resistant Teacher?" (Part 1)

By **Elena Aguilar** on April 29, 2013 9:20 AM

There's one request for advice that I receive more than any other from coaches: How can I coach a resistant teacher? Since I started this blog in the Fall of 2012, I've probably received over 50 emails with a version of this question. This week I'm going to post a series of responses. The first, below, is written by guest blogger Shane Safir, a colleague who works for the National Equity Project. Stay tuned this week for more on this challenge that many coaches encounter.

Tips for Coaching a Resistant Teacher

Shane Safir, Senior Associate, National Equity Project

In my years as a principal, coach, and professional developer, I've lived this question dozens of times and have learned to adjust my perception of the problem and the strategies I use to respond.

The Pitfalls of Perception

The answer to this perennial coaching question--how can I coach a resistant teacher?--actually sits inside the question itself in the word "resistant." When we label a client "resistant," we create a psychological and even moral distance that can undermine our goals. Resistant means "refusing to accept new ideas or changes." This label carries a layer of judgment that may prevent us from trying to understand our coachee's reality, dilemmas, competing commitments, or even aspirations.

How can we really determine that a coachee has refused to work toward change? What if 90% of her has refused, but a hopeful, dormant 10% is open to your support? What if she is actually fearful, mistrusting, under-confident, distracted by competing priorities, or so burned by previous 'interventions' that she can't yet engage in the opportunity you're offering?

How To Approach a "Resistant Teacher"

Here are a few tips for approaching your coachee that might soften her resistance and foster relational trust.

1. **Look in the mirror.** As human beings, we have a natural tendency to look "out the window" for external sources of our current challenges. Resist that tendency, and take a moment to notice your own reactions to this coachee. Do you have a physiological response as you prepare to coach him or her? Does your body become tense or rigid? What emotions come up when you think about this person - fear, anger, distress, frustration? All of these reactions can distort the way you perceive and approach your coachee. Simply noticing your own physical and emotional signals and taking a deep breath may be enough to interrupt the auto-pilot response and shift to a more "distress-free" stance.

2. **Take an inquiry stance.** Inquiry is an ongoing process of asking questions and examining evidence in order to improve our practice. Taking an inquiry stance means letting go of judgment for curiosity. Replacing answers with questions. Eschewing superficial or dismissive explanations ("This teacher must not care about kids") and digging for deeper ones. As you shift into an inquiry stance, you can ask yourself:

- What might be underneath the resistance I'm feeling?
- What have been this teacher's previous experiences with coaching or other improvement initiatives, and how might they be influencing her response to me?
- How connected does she feel to the school community and its leaders?

- How safe does she feel to discuss weaknesses in her practice?

3. Invite your coachee's story. Everyone comes with a story, but rarely are people asked to share it. A key strategy for transforming "resistance" into openness is to invite your coachee to share his or her story as an educator and as a person. This might not feel like traditional coaching at first blush, but remember that it's in the service of building trust and relationship, which allow you to get enrolled to do the hard work of capacity-building.

Schedule time-perhaps even off-site with fewer distractions- to simply connect with your coachee and hear her story. You might ask:

- How and why did you become an educator?
- What are your fears about engaging in this coaching work together?
- If you opened yourself to coaching, what do you think might be possible? What could we achieve together?
- What's been your best experience of support or mentoring?
- How can I best support you?

Here are a few additional tips I've picked up along the way:

Don't Take it Personally

As coaches, we sometimes personalize behaviors that we perceive as resistant. When teachers didn't immediately welcome my support, I wondered what I had done to merit this response. Here I was, organizing myself professionally, showing up with respect and humility, investing my time in this person's growth. And they didn't want me around? The truth is, nine times out of ten it's not about you at all!

Assuming it's personal initiates a mental spiral of self-doubt and blame that, similar to the psychology of labels like 'resistant,' keeps you from unearthing the deeper factors at play. Your role as the coach is to understand who this person is, what makes her tick, and to build a strong enough relationship that you can become a catalyst for change.

When you find yourself personalizing, it's important to take a step back, notice your response, and detach enough to see yourself participating in this psychodrama rather than holding the bigger picture for yourself and the coachee. Only then can you re-engage with compassion and genuine curiosity about what is causing the behavior and how to help the client get past it.

Don't Overemphasize Technical Issues

One final tip is not to enter with a technical approach when the client data (body language, words, feedback from colleagues) calls for a relational one. It's so tempting to grab a tried-and-true lesson plan or pressure-tested "best practice" and offer it as a way to enroll your coachee in a new direction or change agenda. Sometimes, in particular with new teachers who may be struggling to stay above water, a technical offering is spot-on, gaining you credibility and a platform for future coaching. However, I would offer that our prototypical "resistant teacher" requires a more relational approach that moves us safely past the emotional landmines and into the fertile zone of coaching and learning together.

Above all else, approach your coachee with humility. Having coached people both much less and much more experienced than me, and educators of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, I've landed on humility as a core value and facet of my approach. When I arrive at coaching with equal parts humility and confidence in what I

have to offer, I inevitably can see past "resistance" to the person in front of me - with her own unique story, values, and capacities to build from.

How Can I Coach A Resistant Teacher? (Part 2)

By Elena Aguilar on May 1, 2013 9:29 AM

This week I'm posting a series of responses to the most common question I received: How can I coach a resistant teacher? Today I'm sharing some of my thoughts on this challenge.

1) The un-coachable

Let's start with this: Some people are not coachable. For some teachers and leaders, the conditions are not present that allow them to be open, vulnerable learners. For some, their past experiences have concretized to a point that they are stuck there, and although there may be a fantastic learning opportunity right in front of them (you could be the most amazing coach)--they aren't able to be present in that space and time with you. We don't make them wrong. We can look at them and feel compassion--*how sad that some things have occurred in your life which have made you feel closed off to learning opportunities and to me--*but we don't make them wrong.

It helps me to think of "resistant teachers" as "un-coachable." It kind of sounds like the living dead, which isn't too far off for me: not open to learning/not reflective/afraid to look in a mirror=living dead. And this thought also makes me laugh (inside, quiet laugh) which brings just enough lightness and space to my mind so that I don't get too caught in the drama and intensity. It's never productive to be caught there.

When I first started coaching and encountered many "resistant teachers" I consulted with every coach I knew, asking for advice on what to do. An experienced master coach radically shifted my paradigm when she simply said, "Not everyone is coachable." I had been engaged in a struggle that wasn't winnable, that really wasn't my struggle to have.

2) Coaches are not a remedy for resistance

If there are people who are not open to learning, and their current job requires them to be open to learning, then coaching is not the way to deal with their actions. Coaching must not be used as a way to deal with ineffective teachers, or teachers who are not reflective, or teachers who are toxic. And there most definitely are teachers who are ineffective, who are not open to learning and who are toxic. I've come across a large handful in my years in education. However, after calling them all kinds of things for many years, I've decided not to label them as "resistant" because I feel that gives them too much power.

Furthermore, they are not mine to deal with--I am not a remedy for "resistance." A teacher who is not reflective, or open to learning, or able to engage in a thoughtful conversation about his or her practice, or who cultivates unproductive relationships amongst a staff is not a good candidate for coaching. Those deciding who receives coaching must never use a coach in this way. It is not appropriate, it doesn't work, and it's not fair to anyone.

And let me be clear: I do believe that everyone working in and with schools must be engaged in their own learning--principals, superintendents, central office staff, teachers, and so on must constantly be deepening their learning about our work. It's always changing, we can't ever know everything there is to know, and we must always engage in improving our practice.

I have seen teachers scream at children and verbally threaten them. I've seen teachers who show up intoxicated to work, day after day. I've seen teachers scream at their colleagues, administrators, and student's parents. I've seen teachers show videos to kids, day after day after day. These teachers are not resistant--they're something else all together. Responding to their behavior does not lay anywhere in the domain of coaching. It has nothing to do with us.

If you're a coach and you're being ask to work with these kinds of teachers (and you're really clear they're these kinds that I've just described) then back away. Be very assertive and clear that this is not your work. This is not coaching. This is a battle to fight--not with the "resistant teacher," but with those saying that you must coaching him

or her.

3) Don't coach resistant teachers--coach those around them.

Often "resistant" teachers build a following. They rally others to whatever cause they're championing and create friction and factions amongst a staff. However, I've seen entire staffs shift over a period of years when coaches focus their work on the teachers who are receptive to coaching (and ignore the "resistant teachers"). As the receptive teachers experience the positive power of coaching, as they see their own practice grow and improve, as they see student learning increase, they gravitate away from the resistant teachers. Work with the willing and then let their example lead.