"Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it." ~ Michael Jordan

The human mind processes between 50,000 and 80,000 messages per day from external sources such as the media and news and internal sources such as our self-talk. As much as 80% of those messages are negative. No wonder change is a challenge! Imagine what we can create in schools systems, in the lives of students and staff if that number were reversed?

Coaches are positive thinkers who believe anything is possible. They believe problems are opportunities. In fact, they believe there are no problems at all – only opportunities. Coaches see coachees as able, and capable of anything they want to achieve. They hold that belief at all times when working with a coachee. They hold their coachee’s goals, dreams and visions in their mind and their heart and use all of their highly-developed skills, techniques and strategies to help their coachees move toward them.

Resistance is a common response to any change – even those changes a coachee seeks for themselves. It is one huge issue that has been a source of frustration for change-leaders. Can you recall a time you have been baffled by figuring out how to “get people to change?” A coaching strategy provides hope, as well as skills and processes for managing the complexity of change. Change can be far easier that we have believed in the past. That should be good news for every organizational leader!

Ask anyone, anywhere, if they like or seek change. Most people will say “no.” People tend to like the tried and true, to stay in their comfort zone and shy away from change. A skilled coach knows how to look beneath the surface and help their client get past their own inner obstacles that prevent forward motion. As a coach, you provide a safe, trusting relationship in which clients can reveal their thoughts, deepest fears and doubts. When you are successful with a client, it is usually because the client has taken risks, stepped out of their comfort zone, broken through resistance, changed their beliefs and thoughts and took bold action.

Skillful coaching through resistance is gratifying for a coach. We want to help people change. However, it is no easy task to push through obstacles, inner or external. Change is about moving forward in a new direction, taking bold steps; doing what you thought was not possible for you or impossible for anyone to do. It’s powerful. Sometimes, it can be scary or sad. As a coach, you want to be aware of that, and inspire and be a champion for your coachee.

Why Resistance Occurs
Any change, even a positive one, represents a loss of something. Let’s say, you have a conflict with a supervisor. He wants you to do something a certain way, and you believe another way is preferable. You really want to make a case for your way. You want to win. You think about marching into the office and stating your case. Time goes by, and you don’t do it. You are resisting.

Why?

You might be thinking it’s a no-win situation. After all, why do it, feel uncomfortable and vulnerable if you’re sure to lose? Truth is you resist because the discomfort of doing so is too great. In order to confront someone, it is you who must change. You have to be willing to step up and speak up no matter the outcome. It is far easier to stay in the comfort zone.

Discomfort is a growth path. When the stress of impending change is looming, it is actually great feedback to notice the discomfort and greet it as the path forward.

Coaching helps clients break through the fear of the unknown future, urging and supporting them to take forward steps. When clients are in what we call the Discomfort Zone, rather that retreat to comfort, coaches increase their support, encourage the client to take small, courageous steps while keeping the ultimate goal in mind. In the case above, it is far more important that the client takes the opportunity to voice their concern, than stay safe.

According to a study done by Ferdinand Fournies in his book *Coaching for Improved Work Performance*, lack of direction and lack of feedback are the most common reasons for employees resisting doing what they were asked to do. Here is a list of the most common responses from 25,000 supervisors and managers, in order of frequency:

- They don’t know what they’re supposed to do.
- They don’t know how to do it.
- They don’t know why they should do it.
- They think they’re already doing it.
- There are obstacles beyond their control.
- They think it won’t work.
- They think their way is better.
- They think something else is more important.
- There is no positive consequence for them doing it.
- There is a negative consequence for them doing it.
- There is a positive consequence for them not doing it.
- There is no negative consequence for them not doing it.
- Personal limits.
- Personal problems.
- Fear
- No one can do it.

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Notice in almost every response is what the employee thinks! Shifting how one thinks is necessary for reducing resistance.

Other recognized works merit attention. In *Managing Transitions* William Bridges talks about loss and the importance of acknowledging losses that are felt and frequent prior to a change being made. One might feel a loss of face, loss of status, loss of confidence, loss of their former self, and will experience grief for that loss before they can get excited about the change. It can take a great deal of time, patience, trust and probing to uncover what is behind the resistance that appears.

When a coaching client doesn’t do what they say they commit to do, that is great feedback for the coach! And an opportunity to uncover what lies behind their inaction. Resistance can often begin to appear as clients begin taking action. They go from comfort to discomfort!

**Letting Go**

A client must be willing and ready to let go in order to move forward. Coaches help do that. Coaches help the client identify and acknowledge the value of past thoughts and behaviors, as well as reframe how they view the future change.

One very helpful coaching question - “*What do you need to let go of?*” zooms right in and allows the client to reflect and identify what thoughts and behaviors they need to shed to achieve a goals.

For example: a new principal was plagued with feelings of inadequacy. She wanted to be more confident in her ability to be an effective speaker. While living in the Comfort Zone, she didn’t have to step up, in her former role. But now, as a new leader, she knew she had to and was smack in Discomfort. In order for her to become that more confident person, she had to first, Let Go. She had to let go of a view of herself as meek and quiet. She had to say good bye to that safe self she inhabited for so long.

Letting go is part of the grieving process. It can create pain and sadness. As a coach, during this trying time, encourage the client to balance the feelings with things that are fun for them, or nurturing.

**Break Through Resistance Strategies**

Coaches are positive thinkers, who believe anything is possible. We believe that problems are opportunities. In fact, we believe there are no problems at all – only opportunities for learning and growing. Coaches see their clients as able, and capable of anything they want to achieve. The coaching relationship would be a snap if there were no resistance.
Factors affecting resistance can be external and beyond the control of the client. However, frequently they are internal – the inner thoughts held by the client. Thankfully, coaching provides the process, relationship and skills for partnering with the client to observe and break through the obstacles causing resistance.

**Assumptions**

Assumptions are a form of negative, inner-thinking that keeps clients from moving toward a goal. They think they already know the outcome and act accordingly. They think of past experiences and assume the same will happen in the future.

When working with a client, a coach stays focused on the goal and positive results a client wants. If a client’s actions are the “same old, same old,” naturally the result will be the same. However, a coach encourages and supports their client to move forward, with different actions, to create a new outcome.

It is important for a coach to “call out” an assumption to a client when they hear one. Help the client notice that an assumption may or may not be true, and may, in fact, be a factor that affects their progress toward a goal.

Challenge assumptions to get to the heart of an issue and open up possibilities for designing the next best steps. Let’s say you invite a teacher to participate in a new committee the client wishes to start. Suppose a staff member replies with, “No thanks. Nothing happened last time I was on a committee and it wasted my time so why would I get involved now?” You would be fortunate to get such clear, direct feedback… and learn the assumption behind the resistance. Now you can respond! The client could say, “You're absolutely right. Last time we dropped the ball. This time, I assure you this is a high priority and we have an action plan to implement the work of the committee. We really need you and hope you will reconsider.” The assumption of the past experience influenced the current situation. However, by uncovering the concern, the client and teacher can move forward.

**Sample approaches for coaching assumptions:**
Think of an assumption you have made in the past.
What was the impact of that assumption?
What if the assumption was untrue?
What might occur if it were false?
What outcome might be possible if you let go of the assumption?
Why might you hold on to that assumption?
Limiting Beliefs

Think of the “self talk” and mental chatter most of us experience. Limiting beliefs keep us stagnant, trapped in the past, and trapped in our own head. Examples:

• I have nothing really important to say.
• I’ll never lose those last 10 pounds.
• I’ll never be rich.
• I’m shy.
• I can’t do that.
• I’m not creative.
• I’m not smart enough.

Limiting beliefs are inner voices that put limits on what we think. Imagine what would happen if those limiting beliefs were removed, or better yet, transformed into positive thoughts. What would it be like for a client to think instead…

• I have a lot to contribute to this project/group/work/world.
• I can lose those last 10 pounds.
• I can create all the resources I want.
• I create ideas.
• I am smart and lovable.
• I can do that.
• I can learn anything.

A skilled coach helps a client eradicate limiting beliefs by guiding the client to reframe them, by turning negative thoughts into empowering ones. Transforming beliefs is the heart of coaching, and the heart of change. A coach is always listening to a client’s language and will confront a client when they hear a limiting belief. Encourage the client to notice them, increasing their awareness about the extent to which they have an impact on the client’s world.

Ask the client to notice and write down limiting beliefs as they arise. Help them create a “turnaround statement” that they will say to themselves every time the (old) limiting belief comes to mind.

For example:
Limiting Belief: I have nothing really important to say.
Turnaround Statement: I have a lot to contribute to this project.
Sample approaches for coaching limiting beliefs:
How does that belief hold you back?
What is the benefit of letting go of that belief?
Challenge clients to become aware of their limiting beliefs. They can list them and begin to notice how often they arise.

Progress is impossible without change and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything. ~ George Bernard Shaw

Fear is an invisible barbed wire fence. ~ author unknown

No one ever died of discomfort, yet living in the name of comfort has killed more ideas, more opportunities, more actions, and more growth than everything else combined. Comfort kills! ~ T. Harv Eker

You are today where your thoughts have brought you. You will be tomorrow where your thoughts take you. ~James Allen