

From Drag to Lift

HOW TO USE RESISTANCE, COMPLAINT, AND CONFLICT TO ACCELERATE CHANGE

One of the most formidable, and yet constant, challenges of leadership involves responding to and accelerating change. Much of the leadership conversation centers on how to overcome the forces against change. Perhaps the answer involves working with these forces instead of against them.

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We recently installed new door locks on our house. The first time I went to lock the door, I could not get the lock to work. I tried every door-locking trick I had ever learned: I pushed, pulled, shoved and then pushed while pulling while twisting while making coaxing noises. It was all to no avail. I was thoroughly convinced that we had a broken lock. Then my husband showed me that the lock was designed to work in such way (don't ask me to explain the technical aspects) that boiled down to **working with the design of the lock** instead of against it. By simply tapping the handle, the lock worked perfectly.

In my work with leaders, most conversations eventually shift to the need for responding to and accelerating change. The topic of change seems both ubiquitous and unsolvable. The forces against change are strong and often fueled by the behavior of those who must change. We have been taught to overcome resistance, placate

complaint and resolve conflict. Yet I often wonder if we treat these forces against change the same way I treated the lock. First, we try everything we've ever learned. Overcome resistance by insisting that everybody "get on board." Placate complaint by ignoring it or marginalizing the complainers. Resolve conflict by dominance, avoidance or mediation. Failing all of that, we push, pull, shove and coax in hopes that people will go along with our latest change effort. In essence, we work against these forces in a never-ending game of tug-of-war. Yet as I have adapted to significant change in my own life, and as I've coached leaders through change, I've begun to recognize that the very forces I used to view as "drag" on the system will actually "lift" the system to success. Resistance can create traction. Complaint can release commitment. Conflict can unleash magnificent collaboration.

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This article explores the potential these forces offer as “lift” in the system. I don’t pretend to have all of the answers for how to make change happen, nor do I discount how very difficult real change can be. I am simply suggesting an alternative way in which to see and respond to the behavior of the people around you and to their own internal responses to you. My hope is that through a new way of seeing and responding to each other, we can solidify the relationships that make “all of this” worth it. After all, the need to respond to change isn’t going away. Perhaps we can use the forces of change to draw us closer together while accelerating change.

Throughout this article, I will use the metaphor of “lift and drag” to describe the energy in any system that is trying to change. I borrow this metaphor from my piloting days, when I first had to understand what got an airplane off the ground (lift) and what helped it slow down so that I could get back to the ground in one piece (drag). Here, I will refer to lift as the force that moves a change effort forward, and drag as the force that slows change down. Just as an airplane needs both lift and drag to successfully complete a trip, a change effort needs both lift and drag to successfully complete a transformation. Too much lift - imagine a flight that lasts for days - and you won’t get many passengers. Too much drag - imagine going from one side of the city to another by airplane - and you just won’t get anywhere. In an airplane, the pilot manages lift and drag using airspeed, the horizontal stabilizer, flaps, and landing gear. In this

article, I propose that a leader can use resistance, conflict and complaint to manage lift and drag in a change effort. Most leaders acknowledge that there are too many forces “dragging” their change efforts; therefore, my focus here is how to create more “lift.”

RESISTANCE

During a leadership session several years ago, we started talking about how to manage several projects. One of the participants in this conversation happened to be a fairly well-known project manager who was in the process of tackling a high-profile project in our company. I commented that how we handle resistance as a company would likely predict our success on the many change projects we were currently contemplating. This participant (I’ll call him Bob) turned to me, gritted his teeth, squared his shoulders and with a pressed voice said, “I’ll tell you how to handle resistance. You knock it down. You bust it. You let EVERYBODY know that they are expected to be on board or out. And then you FOLLOW-THROUGH.” At that point in my life I was neither equipped nor inclined to challenge his point of view. However, my personal experience of the exchange was of *more resistance*, and of the underground variety to boot. Had I been working on one of his projects, it would have been hard for me to venture forth with my best ideas, and I probably would have gone around him to get things done. I also made a mental note that should the chance to work with Bob ever come up, I would pass. In other words, (and as much as I hate to admit it), I would have become

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“drag” on Bob’s project. I left that exchange assuming that Bob handled resistance pretty much the way he described. I wondered how his approach impacted the various people he worked with.

It also started me on a quest to experiment with different ways to handle resistance, primarily out of an interest to learn how to best get the work done, while building relationships, capability and future capacity.

My first experiments started at home. I am married to a man who constantly seeks to improve things...everything. If the bird feeders are attracting too many squirrels, I can count on him to design a better deterrent. If neighborhood dogs begin encroaching on our deck, I know I will soon be contending with gates. And if we can’t get voice mail from the phone company...well, you get the picture. I constantly have to adapt to new and better ways around my house. Now if you were to ask my husband if I embrace or resist change, he might regale you with stories of antics toward ‘resistance,’ ...how I refused to use the gates (I propped them open), or how I constantly fought against the phone system, or how I didn’t want to move to the lake, (“Get a lake house and you will be spending weekends alone,” I said). So if I’m such a powerful “resister,” how come I use the gates, paid for the phone system and now live at the lake? Is it because my husband “overcame” my resistance? He would be the first to tell you that wasn’t it. Somewhere along the way (and admittedly, many heated discussions later), we discovered that my resistance was usually the

first clue that I was going to change. As a result, our conversations about the big events in our lives are less likely to turn into a heated battle and more likely to involve a conversation that considers all of the alternatives.

While I was experimenting at home (where I contend we are most vulnerable), I also began noticing how resistance played out at work. I was once in a training program that encouraged me to, “embrace resistance.” I thought the phrase had to be an oxymoron. I certainly did not leave that program equipped to embrace resistance. However, the seed was planted, and soon I began to see examples of resistance providing both drag and lift at work. For example, in one meeting, I saw a person try to interject his point of view about a recent decision only to be told by the group head that he was not interested in any more information. They went on to roll out a change to customers that created such upset that they had to reverse the action. In a different meeting, (and around a different decision), I saw a similar dynamic begin unfold, but in this case, the leader of the meeting asked the “resister” what made her so concerned. The leader followed with the question, “How do we move this decision forward while addressing those concerns?” A dialogue followed that brought out several key points that informed a more effective decision.

After some time and more experiments, I saw resistance differently. Where once I viewed resistance as the force that kept change from happening, I now see resistance as having the information I need to get traction in a change

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effort. (Just think of the difference between your car tires on dry pavement vs. wet ice.) In other words, those who resist are often holding information, or a point of view, that might make the change effort more successful. Using, instead of overcoming, resistance provides traction to move forward rather than continually circling back. And when things are moving forward, you have “lift.” The difficult work of using resistance means asking questions to get at the data inside of the resistance. Even

more difficult is the work of allowing resistance to exist while still expecting people to carry out the change at hand. This can only be done when resistance is acknowledged, honored and kept at the surface where everybody can see it. In effect, instead of “dominating” resistance to eliminate it, the way Bob did, it means to respect resistance as a means to get traction on change. The table below summarizes some of my observations over time:

PEOPLE WHO FIGHT RESISTANCE	PEOPLE WHO EMBRACE RESISTANCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to stop or bury it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow resistance to exist
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell and sell their own vision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek to understand how others see things; Ask open questions to get to the root of resistance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insist on their way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illuminate choices and consequences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use organizational power to force compliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use personal power to energize people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get distracted by resistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay focused on vision and goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frame resistance as personal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frame resistance as an essential part of change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only hear what supports their position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen for all data points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hoard data or share only the action they want, not the thinking behind it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share data and personal perspective at multiple levels
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frame emotions, undercurrents, and conflicts as obstacles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frame emotions, undercurrents and conflicts as data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold the resistance at arm’s length; may restate the words without fully understanding their meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inhabit the other persons’ resistance; actually experience it the other person’s point of view

In essence, the complaint, which few see as a useful force for generating change, is a cover for something much more powerful; a strongly held commitment.

PEOPLE WHO FIGHT RESISTANCE	PEOPLE WHO EMBRACE RESISTANCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insist that others are wrong and that there is only one legitimate point of view 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize and communicate that they don't have all the answers and assume that there are multiple legitimate points of view
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drive resistance underground 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep resistance in full view while creating learning at multiple levels

I fear that a table like this could encourage leaders to try to manipulate others into changing by using some techniques or tactics that would lure the people that they work with into a false sense of security. However, in my experience, I have never been able to truly respect resistance unless I was genuinely interested in knowing and understanding another's resistance.

So here is a word of caution: if you want to succeed in using resistance to accelerate change, find that place in yourself that really cares about what others care about and find that backbone to acknowledge their concerns while holding them accountable to change, even in the face of the many complaints you are sure to hear.

COMPLAINT

Of the many ways that resistance shows up, complaint may be most common. Just listen for a day or two, even for an hour or two, and you are bound to hear someone complaining about something. "Why can't I get some help around here?" "I don't believe this phone system; don't they know how bad it is?" "I just wish I could see some change at the top; then I might be willing to change myself." At first glance, you may reflect on your experience of complaints and realize that whiners surround you. And of course, the whiners are all "out there." However, in hundreds of workshops, Bob Kegan, and Lisa Lahey have demonstrated that by asking a simple question, virtually everybody can summon up a few complaints. The question is, "What sorts of things if they were to change

at work for you, would make a positive difference in the way you feel at work?"

Now, what is the purpose of stirring up this firestorm of groaning and complaint? Inside of every complaint is a strongly held commitment. Otherwise, why bother to complain? (Kegan, Lahey, 2001) Upon summoning those complaints, they take people through a 4-column process that uncovers the strongly held commitment, as well as the "competing commitment" that may keep the primary commitment from being realized. Anyone who has ever made a New Year's resolution

¹ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, [How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work; Seven Languages for Transformation](#), Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2001.

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to lose weight, stop smoking or work well with others can identify with the frustration of not being able to fulfill an important commitment. The 4-column process helps people develop insight into internal forces that are holding them in place, thus allowing them to realize their commitment to issues that are important to them. And these insights, these nuggets of wisdom that help people get things moving, that help people to really change, all started with a complaint. In essence, the complaint, which few see as a useful force for generating change, is a cover for something much more powerful: a strongly held commitment. In a way, the complaint is like the hard covering of a seed husk. Unless something breaks through the husk, the seed can't germinate and grow.

For leaders, the implications of looking at complaints as the cover for a genuine commitment are profound. Most people see complaint as a "drag" on the system. The solutions to this type of drag vary, from getting rid of the complainers, to turning a deaf ear, to putting up an employee suggestion box. Yet none of these actions really provide any lift. In fact, getting rid of complainers might mean getting rid of your most committed people, the very people who embody the "lift" your system needs to move forward, and the courage to voice it, even in a socially unacceptable way.

So what is a leader to do with all the complainers? After all, listening to a bunch of whiners all day can wear on the soul. I often teach leadership programs, and once we get an honest dialogue going, I usually begin to hear the voice of the cynics in the room. Since I began

seeing complaints as indicators of commitment, I have experimented with ways to apply that concept in the classroom. In a recent situation, one of the participants apologized for being such a cynic. I can't know this for sure, but I think she expected me to tell her she shouldn't be a cynic. Instead, I turned to her and said: "Cynics are people who care. What do you care about?" That simple question allowed her to articulate several things in the company that she cared very deeply about, as well as her fear that if she acted on what she cared about, instead of her complaints, she might get burned. She also opened the door for other "cynics" in the classroom to voice their own commitments.

In working with this idea, the first step is to seek the commitment under the complaint. For example, if you hear someone complain about the phone system, you might tell them, "It's the best we can do with our budget," and hope they shut-up. Or you might hear that they are committed to excellent customer service and that the phone system is somehow an impediment to their commitment. Just simply acknowledging the commitment and asking them for ideas about how they might work within the existing system would likely expand the commitment and diffuse the complaint. This is not a guarantee, of course. However, the latter approach is more likely to uncover the commitment that "lifts" the system.

Not long ago, I was having lunch at the beginning of a leadership program and sat next to a gentleman who made several comments to the effect that he

By recognizing their "hidden" commitment, you allow that person the dignity of being seen as a committed person rather than a complainer.

wished he were anywhere but leadership training. After a few minutes, he turned to me and asked, "Which division do you work in?" When I told him I was the facilitator of the program, he blushed and said something to the effect of, "I guess I have a hole to dig out of now." I said, "Actually, you have probably said what's on the minds of most people in the room. What would you recommend I say in the opening that gives us the best chance of starting the program out in a way that's useful to you and them?" I don't pretend that this was the best or only response I could have made in the situation. However, it seemed important to assume that underneath his complaint, he was committed to using the program in a way that made him more effective. By the end of that program, he sat down with me and told me that the experience had changed his view of leadership. If I had tried to sell him upfront, I believe I would have simply started a tug-of-war. Because I saw under the complaint and assumed a commitment, I believe it actually expanded his commitment. In my experiments, I have come to believe that touching the complaint simply increases "drag" in the system. Touching the commitment gives you a chance to create "lift" in the system.

The commitment under the complaint is not always obvious. However, it's up to you, the leader, to see the complaint in a way that

"lifts" your system. Ask questions. Assume that there is a commitment in there somewhere. And let the person know how you see them. By recognizing their "hidden" commitment, you allow that person the dignity of being seen as a committed person rather than a complainer. (Kegan, Lahey 2001). And you may increase your chances of creating lift.

I recently saw this theory in action in a team meeting. One of the key members was late, and after dealing with several problems getting to the meeting, she came in obviously flustered and talking (complaining) about the problems in getting to the location. I found myself distracted by her obvious upset and by how long she carried on. One of the other team members looked at her and said, "This really got to you didn't it?" The tardy team member nodded and at that moment, her upset seemed to completely dissipate. Within minutes, she was an active participant in the meeting and the upset was forgotten. By simply acknowledging the complaint without judging it, the second team member freed the first to let go of a difficult situation and contribute her fullest to our team.

Bob Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey offer the following chart to describe the transformation from complaint to commitment:

I realized that conflict was an essential “precursor” ingredient in every case.

LANGUAGE OF COMPLAINT	LANGUAGE OF COMMITMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easily and reflexively produced, widespread 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relatively rare unless explicitly intended
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explicitly expresses what we can't stand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explicitly expresses what we stand for
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaves the speaker feeling like a whiny or cynical person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaves the speaker feeling like a person filled with conviction or hope
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generates frustration and impotence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generates vitalizing energy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sees complaint as a signal of what's wrong 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sees complaint as a signal of what someone cares about
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nontransformational, rarely goes anywhere beyond letting off steam and winning allies to negative characterizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transformational; anchors principle-oriented, purpose-directed work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easily and reflexively produced, widespread 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relatively rare unless explicitly intended

Seeing the commitment in the middle of a complaint requires a new kind of sight. Complaining is often seen as a detrimental activity and our tendency is often to try to stop the complainer or judge them as not helpful or even hurtful to our efforts. However, let's remember that someone likely wouldn't be complaining if they didn't care. Our team member mentioned above was enormously committed to our success. These complaints are often

an unconscious way of expressing a commitment. When we as leaders see that, we have a chance to provide lift in the system. That said, I don't want to imply that just seeing the commitment in a complainer will provide easy lift. In fact, it could lead to increased conflict because you will have left the usual rules of "point-counterpoint" and started a new kind of dialogue.

CONFLICT

If you read the previous sentence you may have noticed the words, "increased conflict," and thought, "Uh-oh, I don't need additional conflict in my life." If that's your reaction, I encourage you to think differently. The idea of using conflict to provide lift in the

system was first introduced to me by Larry Biester. His master's thesis proposes that conflict is essential for magnificent collaboration. When I first heard this idea, it excited me, scared me and intrigued me all at the same time. I was sure he was on to something very important. Yet as

Teams that have created the most extraordinary results had the most conflict.

I searched my memory, I found few instances where conflict per se provided magnificent collaboration. At least, that was the case when I started by looking just at the conflict situations. When I then looked at the rare occasions where I've experienced magnificent collaboration, I realized that conflict was an essential "precursor" ingredient in every case. Biester defines magnificent collaboration as the kind of work where multiple people (as in teams) produce extraordinary results.

The first example of this kind of collaboration again came from my home life. Soon after we moved to North Carolina, my husband started lobbying for a weekend lake house. As I mentioned before, my response was consistently "get a lake house and you will be spending weekends there alone." His desire for a lake house and my lack of desire produced a consistent source of conflict between us for several years. One day, I accidentally asked the question that began a magnificent collaboration. I said, "Why is it so important for you to have this?" and he, in turn, asked me, "What keeps you from wanting a lake house?" As we explored the source of our conflict, we came to see the many ways we saw the experience differently. He loves working with his hands and tackles major projects on the weekends to unwind. I love resting and reading on the weekends and feared that I would be drawn into the many projects and never get to unwind. When we co-created a picture of life at the lake that took care of both of our needs, our vision went from a

weekend house to living at the lake full time, building our dream house for retirement and working from home. This magnificent collaboration could never have happened if we hadn't both contributed our differing views into the equation.

When I've looked at my own experience in business and what I have witnessed in my clients, teams that have created the most extraordinary results had the most conflict. Using conflict effectively requires doing three things well:

1. Bring the conflict into the open
2. Understand the multiple perspectives represented at the table and
3. Use those perspectives to create an outcome greater than any one alone could achieve.

These three challenging, yet rewarding actions are at the heart of Biester's thesis.

As I searched my memory for examples that would test this thesis, a particularly strong team experience from my banking days came to mind. One of the leaders who reported to me began lobbying for a complete redesign of one of our programs. At first, I resisted. (Of course, that meant I was about to change.) I felt the redesign would be too expensive, too time-consuming and too risky.

Eventually, I came to see it his way and we set some goals and started the project. During our first major design meeting, I began to question my decision. Several team members seemed dubious and one outright said it wouldn't work. The tension in the room was palpable, and people who were friends

coming into the session were starting to question those friendships. The design firm we were working with was accustomed to these dynamics and managed the turmoil and conflict to keep it from seeming personal. While that made the tension more bearable, I still wondered if we were doing the right thing. However, as time progressed, and everybody's point of view was heard (even those that I had not previously valued), we came to realize that in setting our original goals, we were much too conservative. We could see the possibility of drastically shortening the program while significantly improving its effectiveness. That collaboration netted a team that not only delivered a wildly successful program, but continued respect each other through conflict and collaborate in different ways for years to come. Looking back on the experience, I'm convinced that the conflict, combined with the openness to hear multiple perspectives, made those extraordinary results possible.

Using conflict to deliver magnificent collaboration requires the ability to simultaneously hold two seemingly contradictory stands. First, one must be clear on his/her own point of view, recognize how s/he has made meaning of the situation and acknowledge that s/he has constructed her own reality (not divined some reality from "out there"). Second, one must be open to others' points of view, curious about how they have made meaning of a situation, interested in what informed that meaning and aware that others are constructing their own reality as well. In short, when people let go of the need to be "right," they change the game of tug of war into a collaboration that can unleash creativity, ideas and the possibility of seeing things that didn't exist before. Biester shows the difference between ordinary collaboration and magnificent collaboration in the following table:

² Larry Biester, "The Gift of Conflict: The Essential Catalyst to Magnificent Collaboration", Master's Thesis, 2001

Resistance can create traction. Complaint can release commitment. Conflict can unleash magnificent collaboration.

ORDINARY COLLABORATION	MAGNIFICENT COLLABORATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addresses technical challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addresses adaptive challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predictable results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unpredictable results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short term focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long term focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task oriented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems focused
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader driven 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group driven
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No team transformation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team transformation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict avoidant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict encouraged, accepted

Creating the shift - the kind that provides “lift” - requires asking questions from a place of curiosity and openness as opposed to a stance of trying to make them see things your way, or of trying to get them to see the error of their ways. When someone holds a different point of view ask, “How did you come to see it that way?” When someone makes the case that something won’t work ask, “What would work?” When someone advocates for a different path, ask, “Where would that path take us?” In other words, **enter into** the conflict instead of trying to resolve it, avoid it, or dominate it. Again, creating this kind of shift requires a different response that comes from a different way of seeing. Examples of just the opposite abound in our companies, media, and schools. It’s time to change our view of conflict. Simply resolving or avoiding conflict will not get the results we need. Extraordinary results come from

magnificent collaboration. And magnificent collaboration is fueled by conflict.

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of resistance, complaint, and conflict in many ways are different facets of the same object. It’s hard to separate one from the other, and in any large change effort, all three are present in abundance. So are our traditional responses of overcoming, placating or resolving. This common arsenal neither accelerates change nor deepens relationships. None of these traditional responses unleash the potential waiting just under the surface. **Traction. Commitment. Magnificent collaboration.** Achieving these sources of “lift” requires new sight and a response that turns towards each for the sake of understanding, possibility and deeper relationships. In order to achieve extraordinary results, we must give up our old ways of, “I’m

right/you're wrong," or "I win/you lose." For if we win in this game and yet we never really grow and change, what have we won?

Complexity, turmoil, and the need for change are not going away. As leaders, we must find better ways to adapt and unleash the energy in organizations to accelerate change. Our organizations are full of "negative" energy in the form of

resistance, complaint and conflict. Yet, each is a form of "vitalizing" energy that will create "lift" in our systems and help us deliver change. Resistance can create traction. Complaint can release commitment. Conflict can unleash magnificent collaboration. It's possible...if we ourselves can change our response to these forces.

Lynn Carnes accelerates change and unleashes leadership performance in organizations, especially in context of challenges without easy answers. She loves to hear about how the experiments with these ideas turn out. To contact her or share your experiences, go to www.carnesassociates.com or email lcarnes@carnesassociates.com.
