

# ***A Positive Approach to Resistance***

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### **DEALING POSITIVELY WITH RESISTANCE**

Two basic assumptions underlie a positive approach to dealing creatively with resistance:

1. Resistance is. People will always resist, knowingly or not, those things that they perceive as not in their best self-interest.
2. Resistance needs to be honored. It must be dealt with in a respectful manner.

If resistance is handled from a perspective that incorporates these two assumptions, it can become a tool and can actually enhance rather than injure a relationship. Another condition that must exist for the positive approach to work: the caseworker – the individual who confronts the client – must be absolutely clear about what she wants from that person. When the demand is stated in terms of time frames, specific outcomes, potential benefits, concrete behaviors that are needed, and so forth, the probability that the caseworker will achieve compliance from the client is great. Even if compliance is not possible, the resistance will become more workable.

The positive approach consists of four separate steps: (1) surfacing, (2) honoring, (3) exploring, and (4) rechecking. Each step should be completed before moving to the next step. This is referred to as the S.H.E.R. model.

### **1. Surfacing the Resistance**

After the caseworker has clearly stated what he or she wants from the other party, the first – and probably most difficult – step is to get the resistance out in the open. Many people intentionally withhold their resistance for a number of reasons: past experience, mistrust, poor interpersonal relationships, or lack of awareness of their own resistance. For example, the worker could say, “*You seem very upset and angry; please help me understand why.*” It is a good idea to include an explanation that resistance is normal and expected, and that the worker is confident that it can be worked through in a constructive manner. The

surfacing of resistance can be approached easily and effectively by keeping two guidelines in mind:

- A. Make the expression of resistance as “safe” as possible. The caseworker should state clearly--and publicly, if possible--that he wants to hear the resistance. It is a good idea to include an explanation of why the resistance is important and to be straightforward. Once the client is aware that she is not going to be attacked, punished, or “sold” on what the caseworker wants, the caseworker has a much greater chance of exposing the real source of the resistance.
- B. Ask for it all. Listening to a client's statement of what he does not like about the very thing that the caseworker wants is rarely a pleasant experience. Nevertheless, it is the best approach to resistance. When the resistance exists, it is much better to hear all of it than to try to work through the situation in partial ignorance. Invite discussion of clients' concerns by saying, “As we talk today, please feel free to let me know if you disagree with anything that's said or if you have any concerns, so we can continue to talk them through.”

## 2. Honoring the Resistance

Honoring involves the following process:

- A. Listen. When a person states resistance openly, she provides the caseworker with vital sources of information about what the caseworker wants and the potential pitfalls in achieving what is wanted. In addition, the client is making a personal statement about who she is. Any attempt to discount the information not only stops the information but also carries a clear message to the client that her opinion does not matter; the client will interpret this to mean that she does not matter. It is of critical importance at this stage that the caseworker does not attempt to reinforce his original position, to sell, to reason, or in any way to imply that the client should not feel as he does. The correct approach is simply to listen.
- B. Acknowledge the resistance. The act of acknowledgment does not imply that the caseworker agrees with every point of resistance. It is a simple affirmation of the client's right to resist. Statements such as “I see how that could be a problem for you,” or “You certainly have a right to be concerned,” allow the caseworker to respond to the client's concern without relinquishing anything. The caseworker should acknowledge the resistance, but not agree with it.

- C. Reinforce the notion that it is permissible to resist. The caseworker should keep in mind that openly resisting in a safe environment may be a new experience for the client. Periodically reinforcing that the resistance is valuable and that the client is safe and appreciated for stating her resistance creates a positive atmosphere. Statements such as *“It’s really all right that you don’t like all of this”* or *“I can see why you are angry”* maintain the caseworker’s control of the situation while making the environment continually safe for the client.

### 3. Exploring the Resistance

- A. Fully explore the resistance. Once the resistance has been surfaced and acknowledged, and the client understands the worker’s intent to keep the interaction comfortable and safe, the caseworker can elicit the client’s concerns using open-ended and clarifying questions, such as *“Tell me what you think about that,”* or *“Let’s see if I understand what you’re saying,”* or *“Can you explain what you mean,”* or *“This sounds really important to you – please tell me more about it.”*
- B. Move from resistance to action. Ask the client to consider the future, what his or her goals are, and how the worker might help achieve the goals of child safety and permanence in a way that is least distressing and most comfortable for the client. In responding to this question, the client works with the caseworker toward the objective rather than against it. The client may suggest alternative ways the situation can be resolved. The worker can then begin negotiating a solution that meets the casework objectives, and is acceptable to the client. The end point of this kind of dialogue should be the development of some kind of agreement about the next steps to be taken.

### 4. Rechecking

Before the encounter is over, the last step is to recheck the status of the current resistance and the agreements that have been made. This step is essential because it provides closure to the issue and ensures that no agreement will be forgotten. If there is to be a second meeting, rechecking provides a basis on which to start the next interview so that the entire process of dealing with the resistance does not have to be repeated.

## CONCLUSION

The caseworker should always keep the following points in mind when confronted with a resistant client:

1. The objective is not to eliminate all resistance because it is not possible to do so. Instead, the objective is to work with and reduce needless resistance. The reduction is usually enough to proceed with the demand effectively.
2. Always keep paper and pencil handy to make notes during the process. When the problem is recorded, the client's objection is honored and there is less chance that important points will be forgotten. Making notes also facilitates the last step, rechecking.
3. Once the resistance is at a workable level, thank the client and move on. It is important not to try to persuade the client to like the demand. It is enough that the client is willing to agree to it.

This approach has universal application. It can be used in any situation in which resistance is an issue, such as in managing conflict, scheduling work, or dealing with diversity.

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