


ERIK NAGEL

# BEYOND NO



HARNESSING THE **POWER OF RESISTANCE** FOR  
**POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH**



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WILEY

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*For my wife, Dorin, who believes my choice of wardrobe is  
an act of resistance against good taste.*

*For my daughter, Yma, who gently ignores my attempts  
to resist her autonomous handling of curfew.*

*For my son, Maxim, who thinks I should  
chill out a bit more anyway.*





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# Introduction

“Yes, you’re right. There is always resistance,” said my counterpart, a renowned communications expert. Then after a brief pause for thought: “But I must admit ... I prefer it without the resistance.” At that, we both had to smile.

Resistance stands for a very difficult part of organization, management, and leadership. It does not have a good reputation. Often, pockets of resistance or particularly unruly individuals cause concerns or trouble for management by behaving in a non-sensical, irritating, or even destructive manner. With this understanding, resistance is then ignored or eliminated.

I take a different perspective in this book. Everywhere in an organization, resistance arises in very different and often inventive ways, sometimes more, sometimes less subtle. Resistance is a stroke of luck. It makes something clear, brings something to light: objective differences, dissatisfaction, criticism of procedures, different assessments or values. Those who resist have – from their point of view – good reasons for behaving in this way. It is worth taking a serious look at the background to resistance: what exactly has happened? What is it about? What are the actual concerns? Who made what contribution to the resistance? This more-detailed reflection on resistance promises unexpected insights and broadens the scope for action.

All members of the organization experience resistance, exercise it, feel challenged by it, endure it, or deal with it. Resistance is therefore not only a concern for managers, but also for project managers and technical/administrative employees. In this respect, the book is aimed at all those people in organizations who want to take a closer look at resistance. Resistance is a particular issue in management and leadership relationships. However, this does not only apply to managers, as all those involved in management activities have an influence on resistance situations. Managers have a special responsibility in resistance situations simply because of their role. For this reason, it is managers who are particularly addressed in this book.

I have asked managers from smaller and larger companies to tell me about their everyday experiences of resistance. I will recount and explore these situations; this means, for example, asking new questions or assuming the perspective of the person or people the manager is talking about. My aim is to gain a better understanding of resistance by exploring the perspectives of all those involved and investigating how such challenging situations can be managed more productively. I do not want to lecture. Rather, I want to encourage readers to explore their own understanding of resistance and how to explore it in more detail and draw useful insights for their own practice.

The book illustrates various forms of resistance, some of which are to be expected, but some of which are quite surprising. This is followed by an examination of everyday explanations or what I call premature conclusions that stand in the way of a deeper exploration of resistance. I will then offer further possible explanations that also serve to improve our understanding of resistance. The book concludes with concrete tips for dealing productively with resistance.

## Overview: Chapters 1–7

Resistance is (almost always) an integral part of organizations and should not be blanked out, simply ignored, or kiboshed. Just as resistance in organizations should not be demonized, it should not be romanticized either. Resistance appears in all organizational relationships and is worth exploring. The book focuses on the following questions:

- How is resistance expressed and how does it arise?
- What is the reason for resistance or why is the behavior of organizational members described as “resistant”?
- How can management and those involved deal with resistance?

Chapters 2–4 are about making resistance tangible by describing in detail the various manifestations of resistance, as outlined above. In doing so, it becomes clear time and again that managers take certain mental shortcuts in resistance situations to explain the complex and demanding situations to themselves and remain capable of action. In Chapter 5, I work through these shortcuts or hasty conclusions that appear to clarify the situation but obscure a clear view of the resistance situation. Chapter 6 offers an in-depth look at the phenomenon of resistance. I present explanatory models that allow a more differentiated perception of resistance, but also provide information about the triggers of resistance and the dynamics of resistance situations. In the final chapter, Chapter 7, I draw conclusions for dealing with resistance. However, I not only talk about how managers can deal with it when they encounter resistance or when they perceive the behavior or statements of others as resistant, but also about the situation when they themselves create resistance. My aim is to

shape resistance situations in such a way that they are an expression of appreciative management and leadership relationships and, if possible, lead to productive organizational dynamics.

Erik Nagel



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## CHAPTER

# 1

# Resistance

## An Everyday Exception

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It happens in life, as in grammar, that the exceptions outnumber the rules.

—Rémy de Gourmont

I happen to be walking past Peter's office. I strike up a conversation with him about this and that. Peter works a lot from home or directly at the customer's premises. The only thing on his desk is his laptop. As is usual for him, there are no piles of documents and no personal belongings in the room. For some, the office probably exudes a pleasant sense of order, for others an almost clinical cleanliness. In the middle of the conversation, I notice the leaflet about the Gamma project, which is attached to the whiteboard right next to the doorway with two oversized white magnets. Gamma is a major project that has triggered resistance within the organization. I am a member of the

strategic project committee and am therefore responsible for the project. I am aware that Peter is skeptical about it. I comment casually: "Was it you who put up the leaflet?" Peter looks at me with a smug smile and a steady gaze and replies: "Yes, I thought it was important for the management. So, of course, I just had to put it up." I can't help but smile and say that the management will certainly appreciate that.

I found the situation strange and a little uncomfortable. In my opinion, I have a good, trusting relationship with Peter. Humor and irony are simply part of our conversations. This situation was different in that he was noticeably critical of a project for which I was also responsible. It was no coincidence that he commented on the project to me in this way.

When this happened, I had already decided to write a book about resistance. However, I hadn't really delved into the subject matter. Was this resistance? And if so, then it had to be a particularly subtle form of resistance. In any case, this experience intensified my curiosity and motivated me to dig deeper into the topic of resistance and find out what is considered resistance and what forms it can take. While dealing with the topic, I gained an insight into the many ways resistance can manifest itself and why it arises in the first place. In the experience I described, resistance manifests in Peter's ironic comment. Even if the comment is formulated in a friendly and humorous way, Peter is expressing his criticism of the Gamma project. Is he challenging me, or does he just want to express his dissatisfaction? This and much more is unclear: Does he reject the project completely, is he ambivalent, or is his objection mainly directed against individual aspects of the project? Does he want to contribute critically or is he distancing himself? How can I deal with this type of resistance? Looking back on the experience, I realize I should have dug deeper because I never clarified what Peter's actual attitude or concerns were regarding the Gamma project.

In coaching sessions and when advising organizations, I have repeatedly found that dealing with resistance is a real challenge for managers. Likewise, as the episode above shows, I encounter resistance time and again in my own management and leadership practice. Sometimes it is a burden or irritating and remains a little mysterious because it cannot be immediately penetrated and understood. In my opinion, my observation and assessment of the diversity and relevance of the topic are not reflected in the standard textbooks. In most cases, resistance is seen as a negative side effect of change, or there is a call to take resistance seriously. However, these considerations do not usually go much deeper. I concluded that it is worth exploring resistance in more detail, as it plays such an important role in day-to-day management.

## 1.1 Managers Tell Their Stories

In this book, as already illustrated in the experience with Peter, managers themselves will have their say. They will tell stories about the specific situations in which they experienced, felt, or evoked resistance themselves. They report on what happened in detail, how they and the others involved in the situation behaved and how they categorize the experiences for themselves. Over 50 managers from Switzerland agreed to tell me their personal management stories about resistance. They were not asked to use an overthought definition of resistance, but rather how they use the term for themselves and what events they have experienced. The book therefore provides information on how the term “resistance” is dealt with in practice, in everyday work and management.

The managers entrusted me with their stories in the knowledge that I would use them for publications. I will initially recount the stories to illustrate a point, but then I won’t automatically adopt the narrator’s point of view. Instead, I will try to work out

and reflect on the underlying assumptions. I take the narrators at their word and only refer to what they say when thinking about the situations described. In doing so, I will focus on the stage of everyday management life, but also dare to look behind the scenes of everyday experiences. On the one hand, I will try to shed light on the situation, but on the other I always ask myself how the actors and, above all, the managers could have grasped and handled the situation differently. I am aware that it is always easier to look at challenging resistance situations in hindsight. But I do this to do justice to all the people involved in the situation, to gain helpful insights and to present them in a way that the reader can understand. I hope that those managers who have described their cases to me will be able to understand my approach to their stories and take something away from them.

This is therefore not a book in which, as is often the case, events from high-profile major companies are reproduced. Rather, it is about the experiences of practitioners from normal larger and smaller organizations.

In addition to my own management experience and the research I have conducted myself and outlined above, many other researchers' work is included, supported by illustrative case studies. This should enable managers to reflect on their own practice and gain insights for their own management and leadership practice.

## **1.2 The Word "Resistance"**

If the world of managers and their understanding of resistance are the primary focus of this book, then it cannot be a question of formulating a conclusive definition of resistance. Rather, it can be assumed that the word resistance is used or interpreted

very differently depending on the context: Is a certain observed behavior identified as resistance at all? How is the observed behavior then evaluated?

Nevertheless, it makes sense to take a closer look at the origins of the word to understand its common uses and meanings today. The word resistance is a verbal noun meaning *the act or instance of resisting*. The verb resist means to oppose, withstand, refuse to accept, or refuse to comply with. Someone takes a stand against something or someone and may resist in a stubborn, tenacious, or even heroic way. From the opponent's point of view, the opposing person becomes an obstacle or hindrance.

Although the word resistance has found its way into organizational and management contexts as well as other disciplines such as psychology, in our everyday understanding we usually associate the word with mechanics, electrical engineering, and politics. In mechanics, resistance refers to a force that counteracts the movement of a body, and in electrical engineering it characterizes the property of certain substances that inhibits the flow of electric current. Or it refers to an electrical component that is used, for example, to limit electrical current to a certain value or to convert electrical energy into thermal energy. Resistance here is a normal, natural phenomenon, neither positive nor negative, which must be reduced or increased for certain purposes, and which fulfills a specific function.

However, the primary meaning of the word resistance is a political one. Here, resistance can be equated with a social state of emergency in which insurgents turn against those in power, especially if they use their influence against society or parts of it unscrupulously. The insurgents try to uncover the machinations or remove those in power. The Arab Spring comes to mind today as an example of resistance. Or we think of the several hundred students who blocked three main traffic arteries in the

city center of Hong Kong for several weeks. But art and culture are also used in the fight against oppressive regimes: in 2012, for example, the punk rock group Pussy Riot staged a 41-second action in a Moscow cathedral. In doing so, they protested the alliance between church and state. Another example is the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who has been using art to fight against the Chinese regime for years.

The insurgents are fighting back against the unpredictable, powerful regimes and are doing so with great courage and sacrifice. They stand up for freedom, social justice, and a life of dignity and democracy. However, they also know that they cannot control the course of events. In the worst-case scenario, violence escalates, or authoritarian regimes take on a new guise. The insurgents and their supporters face greater dangers. They are harassed for years, and may be imprisoned, thus risking life and limb.

People are probably not always fully aware of the risks associated with acts of resistance, as the protests are carried out with tremendous conviction, euphoria, and strength. The Egyptian author Nagib Machfus, the son of the merchant family Jasin at the time of the British protectorate of Egypt, gave a vivid account of his experience. When the British prevented a delegation of Egyptian nationalists from attending the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, there were demonstrations and unrest. Jasin took part in one demonstration, got carried away, and completely forgot himself (Machfus 1996, p. 662):

*Yes, it had been a wonderful day. The raging torrent had broken over him, and the unruly waves had swept him along like a thin, feather-light leaf, letting him glide along in whatever direction the current took. He could not believe that he had previously allowed himself to be guided only by reason and had followed events indifferently and uninvolved from a safe observation post. Fahmi's [Jasin's brother]*

*remark made him remember how he had marched in the demonstration, so that he, surprised at himself, was amazed: when you're amongst so many people, you don't think about yourself at all. It's as if you've become someone else.*

In this story, it becomes clear how political resistance allows those involved to ride an emotional wave. But outsiders are also emotionally gripped and intuitively take sides with the resisters if they represent the same values and concerns. The insurgents against authoritarian systems are the heroes of the day and they deserve full recognition, not only because we admire their courage, but also because we share their convictions.

In political resistance, all those involved are outside the regular course of events, and the existing order is often called into question, along with those who represent this order. Situations of political resistance therefore represent exceptional circumstances.

### **1.3 Resistance: Burden or Resource?**

If we now look at the use of the word in specialist literature in the context of the management of organizations, the first thing we notice is that resistance, by contrast to political resistance, is usually addressed from the perspective of management. If we usually show solidarity with insurgents and view the situation from their perspective, this is reversed when we look at the context of the organization. Resistance then usually becomes a problem that management is confronted with. However, it is precisely this one-sided perspective that creates a difficulty in dealing with resistance. Taking the management's point of view means taking a position against those who stand in the way of management. Management is easily given a free pass: everything that comes from the top is then considered to be right,

and there is no closer examination of the convictions on which management's actions are based and whether the resistance may (also) be justified.

Resistance is usually seen as a negative, disruptive, if not destructive side effect of controlled change that must be accepted or skillfully eliminated. In this logic, management arrives at a plausible and valid strategic decision which must be implemented after thorough analysis. If resistance then arises to the carefully considered decision from the management's point of view, it cannot be reasonable. The reaction to the management's decision is then quickly seen as tactical, as a defense of the past, or of one's own privileges and is directed against the future-oriented considerations of the management.

Experiencing resistance, especially when it is offensive and aggressive demands are made, is by no means a pleasant management experience. But this certainly does not justify a blanket negative assessment of resistance. As we will see in the book, this negative assessment of resistance is an almost automatic reflex of management or corporate governance. The question is whether this reflex does management and the organization a service – or rather a disservice?

For some time now, there have been calls for resistance to be seen not as a burden but as a resource, as it strengthens a culture of discussion, for example, or expresses a commitment on the part of employees (Ford et al. 2008, p. 368 et seq.). I fully agree with this perspective, but as a demand expressed in this form, it also remains strangely abstract and one-sided. Translated into everyday life, this view can quickly become a paradoxical challenge to managers: "Just look on the bright side." But how is a manager supposed to perceive a situation "simply in a positive light" if they are unable to take anything positive away from it? And it would also be misleading to view all resistance as positive – just as it would be misleading to view all management decisions as positive.



## 1.4 Resistance Is Part of Everyday Life

Another seemingly immutable truth about resistance is that it invariably arises as soon as change is involved. Change without resistance is inconceivable, as “people don’t like change in principle,” according to a frequently stated conviction. So, managers know that as soon as they set off and want to get the organization moving, things will get bumpy because there are deep potholes in the road and fog obscuring their view. To get through the journey in one piece, they need a few tools: an all-terrain SUV (project organization), a four-wheel drive (powerful promoters of the project), a navigation system (stringent management concept, planning with milestones and deadlines), impact protection, seatbelt, and airbag (thick skin) – and plenty of resolve (stamina and assertiveness). But why do we assume that the members of the organization will resist no matter what management does? I believe that such generalized assumptions do not really help us in resistance situations.

It is equally unconvincing or inaccurate to associate resistance solely with planned change. Smaller and larger, planned or unplanned changes are constantly occurring in organizations, so there are always situations for resistance to arise. It is much more likely that resistance occurs on different levels, sometimes visible and audible, sometimes subtle, and inconspicuous. Resistance is not limited to change. It appears – and this is described in detail in the book – in many different forms and is an extremely widespread phenomenon. In this respect, resistance is *a priori* neither positive nor negative; it is a completely *normal* part of everyday management and working life but is experienced as an *exceptional situation*.

When we think of resistance in organizations, we probably first think of strikes for higher wages or better working conditions or of dissatisfied employees resisting change processes.