RESISTING RESISTANCE: A LANGUAGE OF CHANGE

BY SEAN KITAOKA, PHD

For extra copies of this handout, or the content of the slides used in this presentation, go to www.SeanKitaoka.com and click on “Free Stuff.”

*Content with an asterisk indicate material from Bill O’Hanlon. For more information on his work, you can go to www.BillOhanlon.com.
Resisting Resistance: A Language of Change

**Resistance: A Definition.**
“Any client behavior that exhibits a reluctance, on the part of the client, to participate in the tasks of therapy as set forward by the therapist.”

“Any behavior that indicates covert or overt opposition to the therapist, the counseling process, or the therapist’s agenda.”

**Resistance: A Working Definition.**
Resistance occurs as a result of certain kinds of “interpersonal dynamics between the therapist and the client.”

Resistance is *relative*. Resistance is relative to a *relational context*.

**Tools for Working with Resistance: Utilization**

**Utilization**
“Utilization” in general, is an attitude centered on “utility,” or usefulness. What can be “utilized” to support growth and change?

Utilization can refer to a therapist’s openness to looking at things from multiple perspectives to gain an understanding of what kinds of perspectives are more or less useful in a given situation.

Utilization can also refer to the act of using aspects of oneself, the client, or the context as a point of leverage that facilitates movement/change.

**What can be utilized?**
Everything *can* be utilized, but you won’t utilize everything. Here are a few examples to help organize how to think about this:

**Utilization of Client characteristics**
These are client strengths, resources, patterns, values, beliefs, interpersonal positions and roles, expectations, interests, etc.

**Utilization of Therapist characteristics**
These are your strengths, resources, patterns, values, beliefs, skills/expertise/knowledge, etc.

**Utilization of Contextual characteristics**
These are characteristics that are available in the context. We live in Hawai’i, and there are many contextual characteristics that can be used toward therapeutic goals. For
example, taking a walk and viewing the sunset at Ala Moana Beach Park is easily accessible to many people, free, and can also be an antidepressant.

**How to Utilize?**
Because everything can be utilized, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. In thinking about utilization, here are a few steps:

**Step 1: Pay attention**
Look to see what the client values, what resource is having difficulties being expressed, where is the client's energy?

**Step 2: Develop a (tentative) goal**
Once you’ve identified the energy and direction of a client, generate some ideas about how to sponsor and support the *positive intent* of that energy. (Oh yeah, did I mention that it's probably helpful to assume that all client behaviors have a positive intent).

**Step 3: Present your understandings and ideas to the client**
Either directly or indirectly, present your ideas to the client. It's usually best to start off tentative so that you can gauge how receptive the client is to the ideas.

**Step 4: Adjust and Readjust as needed**
Continue to monitor client's receptivity to your ideas. If client is receptive, you can begin to be more directive. If client is not receptive, go back to Step 2 to reevaluate your understanding of the client’s experience and identify any possible reservations, or unmet/unstated/tacit expectations the client may have.

**Tools for Working with Resistance: Strategic Language**

**M&Ms: Matching and Moving**

**Matching**
Being where the client is at. Incorporating what they already believe, what they are already feeling, what they are already doing. By matching, you create a greater likelihood of being invited into the client’s world. A common tendency for therapists/Helpers is wanting to move too fast out of the client's experience into a solution.

**How to Match**

Matching through Acknowledgement/Acceptance/Affirmation:

*Permissive: Giving the client permission to be, think, feel, experience what ever they’re being, thinking, feeling, or experiencing.
Inclusive: Allowing client the space to be a complex, multilayered, multificated, polyphrenic human being. Being inclusive can take on at least two variations: 1) Inclusion of seeming opposites; and 2) Inclusion of exceptions.

Matching through Social Roles and Expectations

Symmetrical Roles: Roles that are based on the principle of equality. Examples are co-workers/colleagues, where the power status of the individuals are the same.

Symmetrical Matching: Matching based on mirroring the other. Examples may include parroting the client’s words (Symmetrical Matching on verbal communications), body language and gestures (Symmetrical Matching on nonverbal communications). In some instances, Symmetrical Matching may lead to a symmetrical escalation (i.e., boasting on one side leads to boasting on the other, and so on; physical altercations).

Complementary Roles: Roles that are based on the principle of “one up/one down.” Examples of Complementary Roles include employer/employee, student/teacher, expert/lay, doctor/patient, etc. The defining feature here is a power differential.

Complementary Matching: Matching based on correspondence and compatibility of the roles. An example of Complementary Matching could include overtly taking a one-up position with a student who sees you as an expert, or as someone whose job it is to give advice/direction.

Moving

Moving, generally speaking is the act of presenting ideas or frames of reference to a client that a client is free to step into. Moving usually involves a shift in perspective, however slight. In this context, when I refer to “moving” I am referring to a way of presenting ideas.

Reflecting is often taught in counseling courses and communication courses to highlight the importance of “active listening” and is generally thought to fall into the category of “matching.” It can seem like you’re “matching,” “reflecting,” or “mirroring” the client, however when you stop and think, you are adding something to the communication.
Your choice of what part to reflect implies your focus. If we expand on this idea, we get a more nuanced version of “reflecting,” that sits on the border between Matching and Moving. You are *matching* because you are restating what the client has just communicated to you. You are *moving* because of the specific focus you provide, and the way in which you provide it.

*Refined Reflecting*
- Reflecting into the past tense: The problem existed in the past and *may* not be present now or in the future.

- Reflecting from whole to part: The problem *may* not be all encompassing.

- Reflecting from *truth* to perception: The way you look at it *could* change.

- Reflecting from problem into preference: Acknowledge the problem while detailing possible solutions.

**Presupposing Change**
Presuppositions are ever present in language. For example, in the sentence “Presuppositions are ever present in language,” I am presupposing that presuppositions exist, and that they happen a lot.

Some common presuppositions include the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stem/Tag</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>What is presupposed?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yet/So far</td>
<td>You haven’t figured out a solution <em>yet.</em></td>
<td>You’ll find a solution in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How quickly</td>
<td>How quickly will you bring up that C to a B?</td>
<td>You’ll be bringing up your grades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many</td>
<td>How many solutions will you find?</td>
<td>You’ll find a number of solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After</td>
<td>After you sign this, we’ll continue.</td>
<td>You’ll sign this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Direct Communication and Indirect Communication

4 Part Formula for Direct and Indirect Communication:

I (1) am saying THIS (2) to YOU (3) in THIS CONTEXT (4).

Direct Example:
“I want you to take notes now.”
In this example, all four pieces are specified and directed. ‘I’ indicates the speaker, ‘want you’ indicates to whom this is directed, ‘to take notes’ indicates what is to be done, and ‘now’ indicates the context or time frame involved.

Indirect Example #1:
“Some of our presenters want you to take notes now.”
In this example, the only thing that has changed is ‘Some of our presenters’ rather than ‘I.’ With this in mind, there is no specification as to who would like you to take notes now.

Indirect Example #2:
“Some of our presenters like the audience to take notes now.”
Here, you can see that the ‘I’ is still unspecified with “Some of our presenters,” and the ‘You’ has been broadened into ‘audience,’ of whom you are a part, and by implication, this means you should take notes.

Indirect Example #3:
“Some of our presenters like audience members to try to think of ways to be able to remember the content of the presentations.”
In this example, 3 of the 4 pieces of communication have been changed. ‘I’ has been replaced with ‘Some of our presenters,’ ‘taking notes’ has been replaced with ‘think of ways to be able to remember the content,’ and ‘You’ has been replaced with ‘audience members.’

It becomes easy to see how playing with these four pieces changes the tone, and directness/indirectness of the communication.

Why be Direct?
Direct communication will work well if you have an established relationship with a client, and the client trusts your judgment. Direct communication also works well for clients who have an interpersonal style of deference/respect for you. If people come to you with the expectation that you’ll tell them what to do, a good start is telling them what to do.
Direct communication often fails when the interpersonal dynamics between client and counselor is not based on deference to authority, or is characterized by mistrust (i.e., some “mandated” clients). Direct communication also fails in instances where “saving face” is something you want to preserve.

**Why be Indirect?**

Indirect communication works well when you want to present ideas that can be picked up or dropped by a client. With indirect communication, there is a term called “plausible deniability,” in which you can present an idea and if a client challenges you on it, you can drop the idea without too much of an interpersonal breach. Indirect communication is a good way to “test the waters” on certain ideas.

Indirect communication also works well when you want to invite the client into making his/her own decisions. If you directly tell someone to do something, they may have a harder time acknowledging their personal agency in the process because they followed your directions. If, on the other hand, you provide ideas that can be accepted or rejected in an indirect way, the client can take more responsibility for his/her choices because you didn’t tell them to do anything.

Lastly, as alluded to earlier, indirect communication often works better than direct communication in instances when “saving face” is an issue.

**Tools for Working with Resistance: Using Strengths**

*Using Strengths*

When working with clients who are more challenging to connect with, it’s often helpful to approach from a perspective of strengths. There is considerable research evidence to support the notion that CONFRONTATIONS aren’t effective. This is not to say that negative or corrective feedback is off limits because clients DO need this feedback at times. What this IS saying is to avoid confrontations that have the tone of being judgmental. In 12 different clinical trials, confrontations as an intervention style did not work, or led to worse outcomes. When providing negative feedback, it’s best to put it in a collaborative/consensual style.

Using a strengths-based approach is much more likely to help get clients engaged in your interactions.
Finding Exceptions

A first step in finding strengths may be finding exceptions to a problem. Sometimes when demoralized clients walk in, they will be hard pressed to identify their strengths off the cuff. Identifying problem areas and determining when things are better or worse begins to lead you into potential strengths and resources.

A favorite question of mine seems to be problem focused, but quickly turns into a strengths-based question: “Why isn’t the problem worse?”

Other helpful questions like this include:
- When is the problem not a problem?
- When did you expect the problem and it didn’t happen, it didn’t last as long, or it wasn’t as bad?
- What was happening during those times that helped?
- How can you build off those times?

Using Strengths

Identify areas in life that the client is competent. What kinds of transferrable skills and resources is the client using in that context that he/she isn’t applying in the problem context?

Are there any people the client describes as being very supportive. What kinds of traits would that person say they client has? How can we apply those traits/resources into the problem context?

Finding a Future

The future can be a very powerful motivating force in a person’s life. An example of a future oriented intervention is the Miracle Question.

The Miracle Question
“Imagine that when you went to sleep tonight, while you were sleeping a miracle happened, and the problem that brought you to therapy was no longer a problem.

When you first open your eyes, what is the first thing you will notice that will let you know that the miracle has happened?

How would other people know that the miracle happened? What would they notice that was different about you or what you are doing?”

This question elicits a future without the problem and begins to orient a client toward goals. Asking follow up questions and details help clients to imagine and experience that future. It also lays a roadmap for things the client can do differently tomorrow morning, and every morning thereafter.