

# Leading in the Face of Resistance

By Amanda Nelson

**L**ook at you, you crazy fool. What are you doing? Why don't you just let well enough alone? This isn't your battle; save it for people who appreciate it. You're not ready.

If you have a brain like mine (and neuroscience says you do) these are the lovely things your brain tells you at that precise moment when you put yourself out there, trying to make a positive change and you get every indication that those involved in the change would just rather remain in the status quo. That message may come to you in a lot of ways, with passive inaction, exclusion, scorn and even active anger. People and the very systems we have set up are wired to resist change; everyone and every system seeks self-preservation.

It is completely natural, and unhelpful, that our brains respond with self-preservation instincts as well. Our primal brains tell us to lay low, keep still, don't move, and the danger will pass. I believe this particularly true in the day where everyone has a keyboard and an opinion, and it's pretty hard to turn down the noise and do what you know you need to do.

So how do you keep on when leadership gets tough? Because if it hasn't, it will at some point for you as you Challenge the Process. Here are some ideas that I have that have worked for me in my own leadership journey.

## Remember Why

Noted author and speaker Simon Sinek has it right; with leadership you have to start with your

Why; your true purpose for being on this planet and the difference you hope to make. The more grounded you are in who you are, the easier it will be to mobilize others to work together for change.

I've also found this immensely helpful however when my work and beliefs have been challenged. When I've experienced resistance and feel like calling it quits, being able to reflect on why I'm working on this change and what I'm hoping the future will be because of my work helps me overcome that part of my brain telling me to find that rock to crawl under. Sometimes when it feels like the whole world is telling you that you can't make it, you're going to have to be the one to believe in yourself enough to keep going.

## Develop and Practice Psychological Hardiness

Authors Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner write in their best seller, *The Leadership Challenge*, about the importance of developing psychological hardiness when a leader is Challenging the Process. They write, "Psychologists have discovered that people who experience a high degree of stress and yet can cope with it in a positive manner have a distinctive attitude, one they call 'psychological hardiness'...people with high psychological hardiness are much more likely to withstand serious challenges and bounce back from failure than those with low hardiness. Hardiness is a quality that people can learn and that leaders can support."

Developing psychological hardiness is a process of practicing commitment, control and challenge. Simply put, you practice and develop your

psychological hardness when you re-commit yourself to the issue even though a problem has arisen, take control of yourself in the situation and rise to the challenge through perseverance and persistence. Practicing these behaviors on smaller challenges prepares you for the tougher one. In other words, the more you do this, the easier it gets.

In the thick of the worst resistance, I have found that asking these questions re-engages me in the challenges I face:

- Am I fully committed to this or not? If not, why and what do I need to change?
- What am I in control of right now? How can I use that to stay on my path?
- What can I do to continue to move forward in the face of adversity?

### **Listen and Learn**

Feedback is the most important growth tool we can receive from others. When the cycle of change gets to those really tough places where resistance is really, really high, that's the place where some of the best growth can occur. There may be some really good information in all the noise, and that information may just help you to uncover one of those blind spots that we all have that keeps us from being our very best.

Additionally, listening to the needs of those impacted by the change may help you make needed adjustments in what you are trying to accomplish or the methods you are using so success can occur. It seems simple enough; we all want to be listened to and included in the process when changes are occurring that impact our lives. How often as leaders we forget that important part and thwart our own efforts in this way.

That being said, there's a lot of noise that isn't helpful as well, as anyone who reads the

comments on social media these days completely understands. It's up to you to decipher what is going to be useful feedback and what you are going to dismiss as noise, which requires a lot of humility to make sure you don't dismiss something that may hurt but could help you grow. In my own leadership journey, this is the point where I've used trusted colleagues, people I know I can count on to give it to me straight and with love, give me the perspective I need to hear.

It is like walking around with a wart on the end of your nose that you hope nobody sees. It's good to have someone that cares enough to say that they see that wart, but they love the person on the other side of it.

### **Feed Your Own Soul**

Kouzes and Posner define leadership as, "The art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations". Quietly tucked away in this definition is the basic truth that leaders are focused on a positive definition of what the future will be. After all, if a leader is selling you on a vision that includes despair, separation, rejection etc., are you likely to struggle willingly for that promise of that future? Probably not.

A funny thing that I've found also in my own leadership experiences is how much my attitude has played a part in my success and failures. When I remain positive in the face of challenges, I tend to get things moving along. It's been a whole lot harder to get anything done when I've set my perspective (and acted upon that perspective) to woe. People gravitate towards people that are positive and see a way forward when failure occurs. People may not remember what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel. And it's a whole lot harder for the actively oppositional people to keep up a campaign when they see you not being impacted, and others appreciating your positive response.

So, feed your own soul by doing something positive for those around you. Offer words of encouragement to someone you know needs it. Read to a kid. Buy someone a coffee. Call your mom. Donate your time.

Because in the end, leadership is not in your head. It is not what you are thinking or feeling, whether that is good in the moment or not. Leadership is what you do to show people your heart. And goodness knows, we need more of that.

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