

CHOOSING BETWEEN CHANGE AND RESISTANCE TO CHANGE¹

Michael Brazzel, PhD, CPCC, PCC

Section 7.1 in Alfred L. Cooke, Michael Brazzel, Argentine Saunders Craig, and Barbara Greig (Eds.), Reading Book for Human Relations Training, 8th Edition, Alexandria, VA: NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, 1999, pp. 191-192.

People come to T Groups for many reasons. Some decide to go for the adventure of it, to learn about themselves and how groups work. Some are sent by their organizations “to get fixed.” Others arrive and are not quite sure why they came. While we get to the T Group for different reasons, we each have the same choices during the T Group:

- A choice of safety and comfort; and
- A choice of learning, growth, and change.

In fact, we make these choices continuously in our lives. The T Group is a good place to become conscious and aware about the choices we do make about safety and comfort and change and how we make them. These choices are really tasks that each of us must accomplish, and be good at, to be healthy, effective human beings.

Resistance to change is not a problem that needs to be fixed or a condition that needs to be cured or subdued. Safeguarding our safety and comfort is a normal and necessary skill that all humans must have to be healthy and effective. Because we live in an ever-changing and chaotic world, we must be skilled, for our own safety and protection, at determining the amount and kind of information and energy we take in from the world, as well as what we send out to the world. We have to maintain effective boundaries that assure our well-being and integrity. We must have good defense or resistance systems to deal with the forces of change that are an on-going part of our lives.

We must also have the skill and capacity to learn from the changes going on around us and make changes in our lives that are necessary to be healthy and effective in a constantly changing world. For survival, we must have the capacity to push beyond what is comfortable and safe to try new behaviors and consider new perspectives.

The paradox, then, is that for individuals to survive and be healthy and effective in an uncertain and constantly-shifting world, they must be skilled at choosing both change and resistance appropriately. The T Group offers a laboratory for observing ourselves and others make choices. It offers opportunities to consider needs for comfort and safety in contrast with the possibilities that new behaviors and perspectives provide.

The external forces for change in our lives, and our internal desire for change, both engender resistance within us. The connection between change and resistance to change is as natural and necessary as breathing. A force *for* change creates resistance to change – a force for keeping things the same.

Too often resistance is seen as unnatural, unwanted and undesirable. It is not. Resistance is a container for energy used for maintaining integrity and well-being – energy that can be made

¹ The perspectives used here about change and resistance to change are based on materials from the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland.

available for other purposes, when the resistance is cleared. Resistance is an indicator of potential energy that can be made available for change. The key tasks for individuals are recognizing our resistance to change and managing our choices between change and resistance to change.

Individual Resistance in the T Group

The T Group is an unstructured process with interaction among members and between individuals and the group as a whole. Members bring their different identities, histories, experiences, and expectations to the T Group. These differences and interactions and member disclosure, feedback, and new self-awareness represent forces for change for individual members. Individual identity – thoughts, feelings, behaviors, physical appearance and sensations, values and beliefs and spirituality – may be challenged. Expectations about member interactions in the group may be confronted. These forces for change will generate individual resistance to change.

Resistance by T Group members is a defense against a force for change in order to maintain individual integrity and well-being. Resistance can take many forms. Examples are:

Deflection. Deflection involves turning aside energy, information, or influence that calls for change. An example is “What happens in this group isn’t real – it won’t really fit back home.” Another example is the internal dialogue that might be a response to being sent to the T Group: “I’ll go, but I guarantee I won’t change anything.”

Because the sharing of strong anger, grief, or joy is uncomfortable, a group member may shift the focus of the group to another member or use humor to escape the impact of the emotion. Talking or being silent to avoid potential conflict or interaction, being confused and not understanding what is happening can be other forms of deflection.

Denial. Denial is consciously ignoring that an event, feedback, or disclosure occurred in the T Group and continuing as though it never happened.

Numbing. An individual member may shut down emotionally and block out information and interaction with others in the face of anxiety or concern about going into areas that are frightening or potentially harmful. Skipping sessions, drugs, alcohol, and excessive exercise are also ways we protect ourselves. These behaviors are ways to medicate and numb ourselves against being overwhelmed.

Surrender. This is quick agreement to avoid conflict and preserve harmony and unity with other members of the group. This can be another way to maintain safety and well-being.

Blaming Others. Criticizing, blaming, or scapegoating other members of the group for undesirable behaviors or issues may be used as a means to resolve one’s own discomfort.

Self-Blame, Guilt, Shame. Holding one’s self entirely accountable for events or interactions in the group can be a way to avoid interaction with others and the potential for needing to consider new behaviors or perspectives.

Resistance and Diversity. We may find ourselves in the T Group with people who are different from us in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, spiritual practice, language, and nationality. They may have different perspectives, styles, identities, histories, experiences, and

expectations different from ours. Truly taking them in – in all their differences – may require challenging and changing our own concept of ourselves in fundamental ways. Resistance to change in the face of others' differences can take many forms: recalling internalized social messages of superiority and inferiority, fear, blame, confusion, guilt, ignoring difference.

Managing Choices about Change and Resistance to Change

There is no easy-to-follow, five-step recipe for choosing between change and resistance to change whether in the T Group or in life. But there are some guidelines that can help make the process easier.

- **Connect change and resistance to change.**
Resistance is a normal response to a force for change. Noticing our own resistance when it happens and being choiceful about it is a means of recognizing opportunities for change – for choosing new behaviors, new perspectives, and new beliefs.
- **Be clear about your intentions and outcomes.**
Being in the midst of resistance and concerns about change can be confusing. Clarity about your intentions for participating in the T Group and your desired outcomes can be helpful guideposts when the path gets murky.
- **Acknowledge and embrace both change and resistance.**
Make both resistance and change O.K. We live in a time when change is advocated and avoided – and resistance is condemned and employed. Change and resistance are valuable skills that are necessary for effective and healthy lives.
- **Live into the tension between resistance and change.**
We are often caught in the tension between our desire for comfort and safety and wish for change. A rush to resolution can lead to cycling between keeping things as they are and change. An alternative is to stay present with and lean into the tension between the choices for safety and change.
- **Be gentle, forgiving, and respectful of yourself.**
The task of keeping yourself safe is an urgent one. We are all imperfect beings who miss opportunities for growth and get mired in keeping things as they are. The key is learning from our experiences and using our insights to guide future choices.