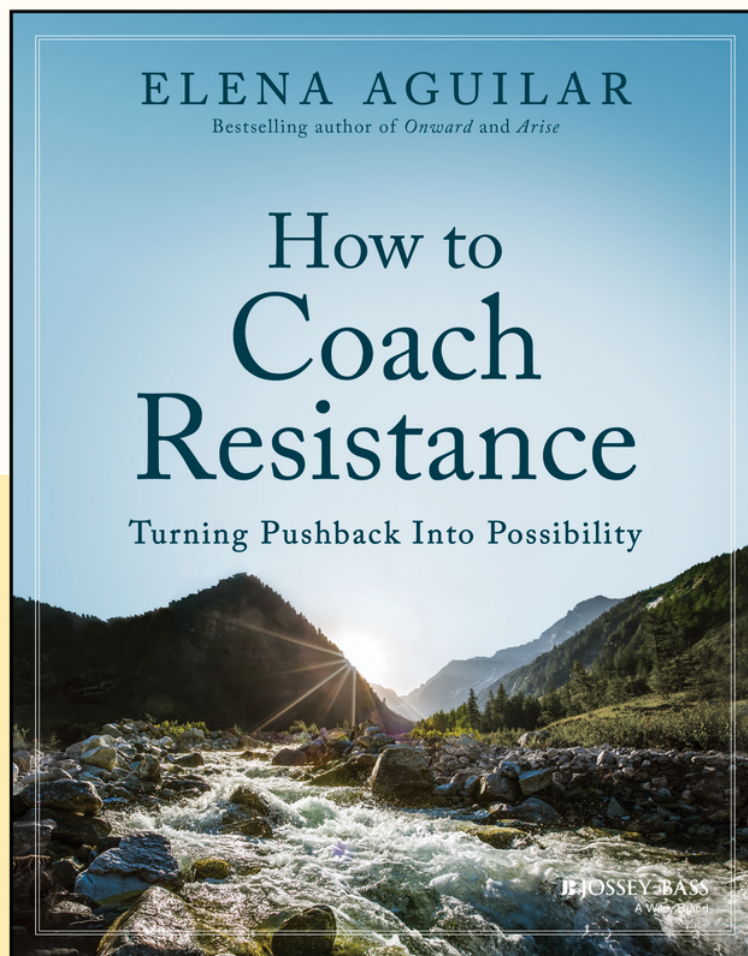


TOOL

Resistance in Professional Learning: A Mini Phrasebook for Facilitators



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Resistance is information.

Welcome. Resistance shows up in every learning environment.

Sometimes it's obvious. A participant challenges you publicly. Someone refuses to engage in an activity. A side conversation takes over a table.

More often, resistance is subtle. A sigh. An eye roll. A joke at the facilitator's expense. A question that sounds procedural but carries frustration underneath.

This resource is adapted from Chapter 6 of [How to Coach Resistance](#). In the chapter, I explore many different flavors of resistance that emerge in professional learning and how facilitators can respond skillfully in the moment.

The examples that follow are just a few of those situations.

As you read them, remember that resistance is information. Before deciding how to respond, get curious about what might be underneath the behavior. Often, what looks like resistance is actually a signal that a core human need—such as competence, autonomy, belonging, trust, or purpose—feels threatened.

One of the frameworks I introduce in the chapter is:

Name What You Notice
Invite Expression
Offer Agency

Not every moment requires all three moves. The work is learning to read the moment and respond accordingly.

Let's begin.



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A Sigh, an Eye Roll, or an Audible Dismissal

The Scene

You've just introduced an activity. Someone sighs loudly or rolls their eyes. Others nearby notice.

What It Might Signal

The activity feels unnecessary, repetitive, or beneath the person's level of expertise. Competence is often at stake.

Name What You Notice

"I'm sensing some reluctance. Before we get into it, let me tell you why I'm asking."

Invite Expression

"If it still doesn't feel useful, I'd like to hear that."

Offer Agency

"If this activity doesn't feel useful, here's another way to spend the next 15 minutes that gets at the same outcome."

A Joke at the Facilitator's Expense

The Scene

You say something and someone responds with a joke that gets a laugh from the room.

What It Might Signal

Not every joke is resistance. Adults often use humor to manage the vulnerability of being learners. When jokes repeatedly target the facilitator or content, they can signal a need for autonomy or belonging.

Name What You Notice

"Fair enough. I'll take it."

Invite Expression

"Not usually necessary."

Offer Agency

Not usually necessary.

A calm acknowledgment often takes the energy out of the moment and allows the group to move forward.



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A Procedural Challenge with an Edge

The Scene

You're running late. Someone asks, "Are we getting a break?" or "When you said we'd finish at 3:30, did you actually mean 3:30?"

What It Might Signal

The person feels their time has been taken. The procedural question is often carrying a deeper concern about autonomy.

Name What You Notice

"You're right. I took us into the break. Thank you for flagging it."

Invite Expression

Usually not needed.

Offer Agency

"Would it be better to take a shorter break now and extend the end time by 10 minutes, or take a full break and shorten the final activity? Let me know what you'd prefer."

Side Conversations During Instructions

The Scene

You're giving directions for an activity and two participants continue their own conversation.

What It Might Signal

The instructions may be too long. The participants may have something important to process. Or they may simply be disengaged.

Name What You Notice

"I'm going to pause for a second. I need everyone's attention for the instructions because what I'm about to ask you to do depends on this piece. Give me 90 seconds, and then you'll have time to talk."

Invite Expression

If the pattern continues, address it privately:
"You've had a lot to talk about today. Is there something you need from me to make this learning feel relevant?"

Offer Agency

"If there's something you need to discuss right now, feel free to step outside and come back when you're ready."



Coach Trigger Reflection Tool



A Few Things to Remember:

Not every expression of resistance requires the same response.

A move made publicly that should have been made privately can create shame. A move made privately that should have been made publicly can leave the group wondering whether you noticed what everyone else saw.

Almost every resistance moment involves a question of power. The more clearly you can see the power dynamics in a room, the more skillfully you'll be able to respond. And finally: trust the silence that follows a thoughtful response.

When someone feels seen, understood, or invited into a conversation, there is often a pause. Your instinct may be to fill it.

Don't.

That silence is often where the real work begins.



WHAT'S NEXT

Keep Learning with Bright Morning



Join Elena Aguilar for a live [Coaching Resistance workshop](#)

If you've ever wished you could sit beside Elena as she coaches through resistance in real time, this is your opportunity. Learn directly from the author of [How to Coach Resistance](#) as she demonstrates how to navigate pushback, coach emotions, and transform challenging conversations into opportunities for growth.



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