

Practicing Change Series

**Tod
Bolsinger**

Foreword by Marty Linsky

Leading Through Resistance

**Quit
Pushing
Back**

Illustrated by
Mark Demel



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FOREWORD BY MARTY LINSKY

I am writing this flying home to New York after four days in Los Angeles with my fifty-two-year-old son, Sam, and his wife, son, and mother-in-law.

The weekend ended with a long unplanned, intimate conversation between Sam and me in front of a fireplace in the lobby of my hotel. Without naming it, we talked about what we both needed to do in this last chapter of my life to enrich our already deep relationship and make the best use of whatever time we have left together.

I experienced it as a hard, complicated, important, and generative conversation, requiring us each to voice and then try to let go of perspectives and assumptions—“truths” that we were inured to and had worked for us. We agreed to individually abandon some habituated ways of thinking and being, and to experiment with some new behaviors.

Then I read Tod Bolsinger’s *How Not to Waste a Crisis*.

Sam and I were modeling the very process Tod describes.

Tod brings a spiritual anchor and a lifetime of addressing concrete problems to the connective work of applying the tools and frameworks of adaptive leadership to the vagaries

of everyday personal and professional life, especially relevant in times characterized by constant, rapid change.

No matter who you are, where you are, how you spend your days, or how old you are, Tod Bolsinger's practical guidance and probing reflective ques-

tions are a vehicle for you and your organization, family, or community to get off the dance floor, get on the balcony, bring a new perspective to the challenges and opportunities in front of you, and begin to make more progress than you have in the past in closing the gap between your most noble aspirations and your current reality.

He has given us a gift. I am already a beneficiary.



ABOUT THE PRACTICING CHANGE SERIES

The **Practicing Change** books are about learning skills for leading in a time of deep disruption and change. Together, through them all, we will learn to recognize and then reset our leadership skills for a world that is constantly being upset and reset.

First, we will learn to see the out-of-date habits that have been cultivated through our successes. Then, we will work on new skills necessary for leading in times of change. Those new skills will enable us to embody a different form of leadership—what is called “adaptive leadership.”

Adaptive leadership, as developed by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, is an approach to organizational problems that is needed when your old best practices no longer work. Adaptive leadership starts with diagnosis: Is this problem something that our expertise can solve or not? Is this something that requires us to apply a solution that already exists, or does it fall outside of our current knowledge and ability? Will it require learning and making really hard no-win choices?¹ As we shall repeatedly see, developing adaptive capacity—



that is, the capacity to apply and adapt an organization's most sacred core values so that its mission will thrive in this new environment—is the greatest challenge of leadership.²

Most communities are hardwired to resist this kind of adaptation. They believe that survival means reinforcing the way we have always done things in the past. The result is that instead of undergoing transformation in order to be more effective in their mission to serve the world, organizations unconsciously reinforce the very status quo that is not working.

Instead of undergoing transformation in order to be more effective in their mission to serve the world, organizations unconsciously reinforce the very status quo that is not working.

Schools want to attract students to maintain the faculty who have come to do research within the safety of tenure and the resources of an academic community. A nonprofit's work that was once an innovative solution to a real problem becomes, after a time, an institution whose own survival is now the core purpose for being. In order to restore their flagging attendance or lagging donations, churches double down on the programs that people have historically loved most and will fill the facilities that they invested in building. And established businesses get disrupted by upstart

startups while they are busy picking out new furniture for a bigger corporate office.

When a changing world or changing needs require an organization, institution, or company to itself change in order to keep being relevant to the challenges that are arising around them, it becomes clear that the internal organizational transformation needed—and the losses that must be faced—is an even more difficult leadership challenge than the external reason for changing.

This requires learning a new set of leadership practices.

In these four books (*How Not to Waste a Crisis*, *The Mission Always Wins*, *Leading Through Resistance*, and *Invest in Transformation*) we are going to reexamine four “mindsets” that have resulted in bad habits for most leaders. We’ll take on one of them through each book:

1. Trying harder at what has been successful in the past
2. Focusing on pleasing our historical stakeholders
3. Doing whatever we can to eliminate resistance
4. Confusing trust with transformation

These mindsets are so ingrained within most leaders that they are usually never questioned. Shouldn’t we work hard, take care of our most loyal members, manage resistance to change, and be trustworthy?

Yes. But also no. Not primarily.

Your primary work as a leader is to develop your own capacity to lead your people through the transformation necessary to face the challenges of a changing world.

And that takes practice. Lots of practice. Hours of deliberate practice.

Feel free to read these books in any order, starting with the “old mindset” that is most familiar or potentially most challenging for you. In each book, we will start with a problem area, and then instead of trying to learn a new intellectual concept, we’ll focus instead on a new *skill*—trusting that that new skill will help us both see and think differently.³ If we can keep practicing the new skill (and reinforcing the new insight), eventually we’ll develop new habits that will become second nature.

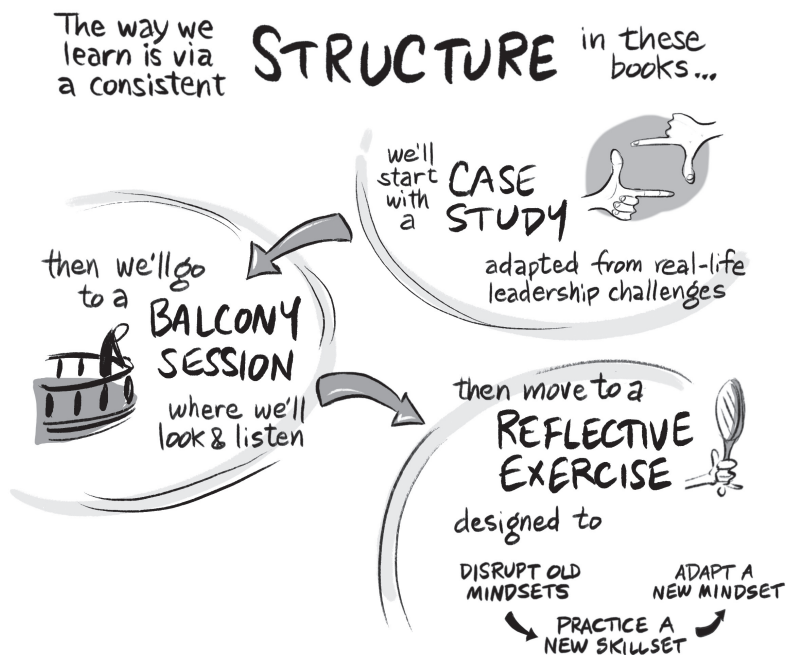
Your primary work as a leader is to develop your own capacity to lead your people through the transformation necessary to face the challenges of a changing world.

The pattern that we will use in these books will be the same. We will start with a case study adapted from real-life leadership challenges.⁴ After the case study (and throughout the book) we will pause and engage in some

reflective exercises that are very similar to the kinds of coaching conversations that my team and I have with leaders all over the world.

These are called “balcony sessions.”⁵

While the “dance floor” is where the action is, the “balcony” is where leaders try to get some larger perspective amid the swirl of the challenges in front of them, decisions foisted on them, opinions and desires of everyone around them, and even their own conflicting internal feelings.⁶ Good leaders



learn how to toggle back and forth between “listening on the dance floor” and “looking from the balcony” and begin to see a different way of approaching a new challenge.

After the first balcony session, we will proceed through a reflective-practice learning process:

1. Disrupting an old mindset (which leads to)
2. Practicing a new skillset (which leads to)
3. Embodying an adaptive reset (a new habit for adaptive leadership)

The Practicing Change books—and the process that they teach us—are the ultimate survival guide for leaders in chaos. Together we unlearn bad habits, master adaptive skills, and embrace a leadership style that offers genuine change and transformation—to our people and ourselves.

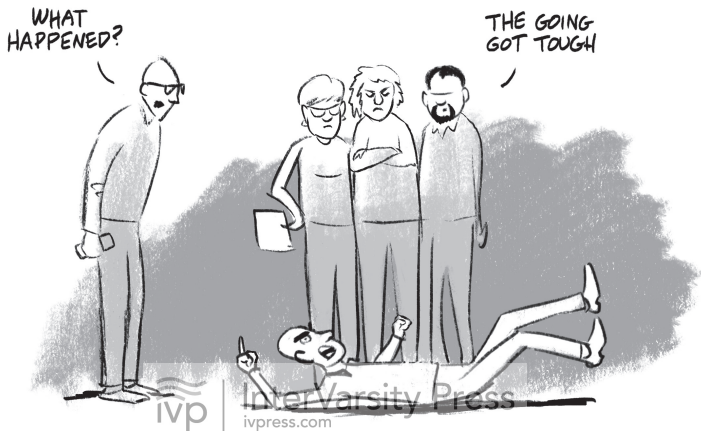
INTRODUCTION

JERKS & CONTROL FREAKS

When the going gets tough . . . *most leaders freak out.*

We don't want to think it is so. We love the idea that if we are called on to call the shots, we will rise to the occasion and lead our teams through any challenge with creativity, poise, and patience. But mostly, the very same altruistic, visionary, compassionate, inspiring people we aspire to be become—when under fire—little Caesars determined to get our way.

Writing on research from the 1980s that defined what has been called “threat-rigidity” response, Columbia Business School professor Rita McGrath explains that the very experience of



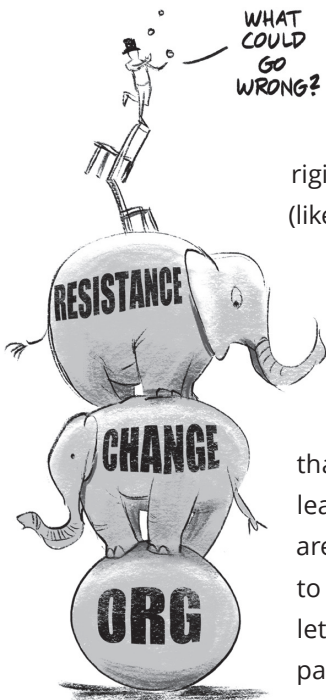
being “under threat” or even *just being criticized or questioned* tends to bring the worst out in most leaders. We “narrow [our] focus of attention, fall back on habits from the past, and simplify in a way that doesn’t take account of the true challenge.”¹

In another book in this series, we took up the tendency for leaders to “fall back on habits from the past,”² but for McGrath, the real problem with the threat-rigidity response is that when threatened, leaders become jerks.³ We not only double-down

on what we believe worked in the past, but we *insist on it* and use our authority to get others to fall into line.

We become control freaks making rigid demands and passing new policies (like ordering everyone back to the office after they have become accustomed to remote and hybrid work) that are mostly about *feeling* in control.

Even more challenging, in situations that call for adaptive leadership—that is, situations where, by definition, leaders *are* out of control, where there are no best practices, where we will have to learn as we go, where we will have to let go of many of the strategies of the past, where we will have to experiment



our way forward—it is *normal* for leaders to face resistance from our followers, and this makes our sense of feeling out of control even worse. At the very moment when we are trying to lead a new initiative, we get resistance from and even are sabotaged by our own people. And most of the time we have no idea how to respond to it—which just reinforces the cycle of feeling out of control, trying to control others, and getting more resistance from those who don't want to be controlled.

Sigh. No wonder there are times when we just want to either give up or fire everyone and start with a new team.

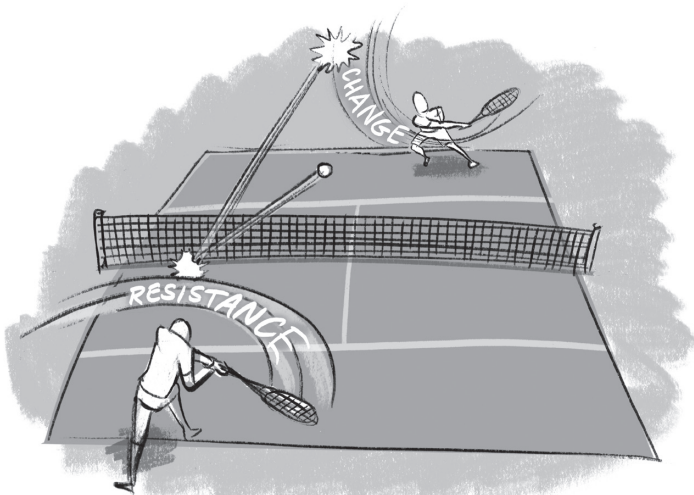
At the same time, organizational resistance is not a reliable indicator of whether a new idea has merit. The new idea that we are trying to get our team to embrace may or may not be a good one—it is far too early to tell. But there will be resistance anyway!

Resistance is like water surrounding a fish. It is present all the time. And any time a leader brings new ideas or plans to an organization, resistance and sabotage is to be expected. It's "part and parcel" of the leadership process as Edwin Friedman has written.

Resistance . . . is more than a reaction to novelty; it is part and parcel of the systemic process of leadership. Sabotage is not merely something to be avoided or wished away; instead, it comes with the territory of

leading, whether the “territory” is a family or an organization. And a leader’s capacity to recognize sabotage for what it is—that is, a systemic phenomenon connected to the shifting balances in the emotional processes of a relationship system and not to the institution’s specific issues, makeup, or goals—is the key to the kingdom.⁴

Once leaders are able to take hold of this “key” and understand that resistance to a new idea, plan, or project *is a normal response* to the change in the emotional balance in the group, healthy leaders can then adjust their own responses to keep the change process progressing. But for well-spoken, visionary leaders who are skilled at moving an organization forward through charisma, power, or sheer will,



this insight is itself disruptive. It may require a much deeper process of personal formation to develop the tempered resilience to lead in the face of the resistance of your own people.⁵ At the very least, the old mindset and connected skill set for getting your group to go along with the change have to be set aside, and a new way of leading must emerge.

This new way of leading is a capacity and set of skills that begins in a leader's own self-awareness (like how insecure I become when I feel out of control!) and comes to fruition in an organization being transformed to come together and take on the challenges of a changing environment. To learn this new way of leading, we'll take some instruction from a group of Mennonites, some jujitsu masters, and a hostage negotiator.

Let's start with a small business owner with a new idea.

CHAPTER 2 OLD MINDSET: DON'T LET THEM PUSH YOU AROUND

I was in a southern state with a United Methodist District Superintendent, standing in front of the cookie table as the rest of the participants were packing up to head back to their churches. I was grabbing a cup of coffee before making the short drive to the airport to fly home. I had just finished two days of working with clergy and lay leaders. Our topic was leading change in uncharted territory, and by all accounts the event had gone well. Those who had attended had read my book *Canoeing the Mountains*, and they had lots of good questions and engaging conversations. My host expressed his gratitude for the work that I had done teaching on adaptive leadership.

“Thanks also, Tod, for being willing to send a copy of the presentation slides, too. I know folks would like to review them as they try to lead change efforts in their home churches.”

“My pleasure,” I said. “I’ll send them just as soon as I have some connectivity—maybe even from the plane tonight if the Wi-Fi is working.”

“Thanks again,” the District Superintendent said and let out a little sigh. “You know? I keep thinking that this is really great training—and—I *don’t know anybody who can actually do this.*”

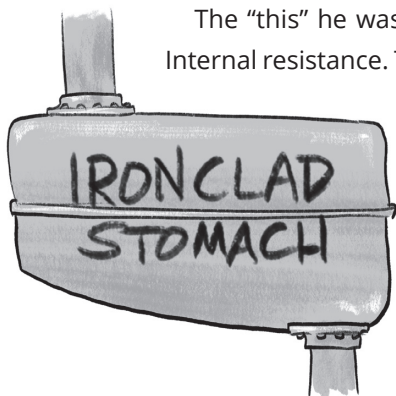
I asked him if he thought that maybe there was something that I needed to change in my training approach. “Could I teach the concepts in a different way that makes it easier to put into practice?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, that’s not it. I just don’t think we have anyone who has the stomach for this.”

The “this” he was talking about was resistance. Internal resistance. That is, the organizational resis-

tance that we face *from our own people* when we initiate a new idea or change the organization in a substantive way. For most leaders this is the most soul-sucking reality. We are prepared for obstacles, we know there will be unexpected hardships, delays, foiled plans,

and missteps. We are ready as we can be to face the external challenges with both resolve and perseverance. But when we encounter resistance *from our own team*, it takes the wind from our sails. We feel betrayed. We get discouraged. We feel sabotaged.



ELEMENTS OF A STRONG LEADER

An entrepreneur and co-owner of a communication and branding company told me the story of when one of her clients experienced resistance from her own team, pushback so great that the client ultimately couldn't handle it. When the criticism and opposition became too high, the CEO turned on the branding company, blamed them for the bad strategy and the organizational conflict, and terminated the contract as a way to calm down the system and take the heat off herself.

"She just fired us, and it was the most undeserved firing ever."

This was the first time that her company had ever been fired, and it was at the time their largest client. "We were a small company, we lost 40 percent of our income, I was pregnant, and it threatened to undo our business."

One of the most important things to remember about the hard work of leading change is that it doesn't always go the way you want it to go. Whether you are a consultant working with the leader of a company or the CEO of the company itself calling the shots, there is no guarantee that any of the change processes and skills are going to work out. Sometimes the heat just gets too high.

And while the branding company was fired, the real losers in the situation were the CEO and the company. They had needed to work through the conflict and get to necessary

changes that would help the company thrive. When I spoke with the branding company owner about this experience, she was philosophical and reflective. Because she had taken the heat *for* her client, she really understood how much heat her client herself had been feeling within her company. “Bringing change is hard. And if we don’t accomplish the change, we feel like we failed.”

What she learned in taking the blame for a CEO who couldn’t handle conflict was a lesson that she wishes she could go back and tell her former client: “My identity doesn’t hinge on what happens in this project.”

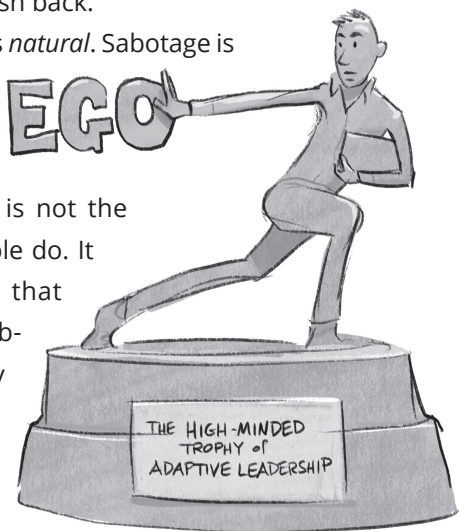
When we have a new idea or initiative that is ours to do, and our own people oppose our leadership, we take it personally. Our egos get overinvolved, and it feels like our identities are at stake. We experience any disagreement with a plan as opposition to *us* personally and professionally.

“My identity doesn’t hinge on what happens in this project.”

At that point, some of us become passive and avoidant, what Ed Friedman called “peace-mongers,” i.e., those who continually choose an uneasy lack of conflict over genuine transformation: “someone who is more concerned with good feelings than with progress, someone whose life revolves around the axis of consensus.”¹

Others of us become entrenched, dug in, controlling commanders insisting on our way at all costs. Like Carlos in the story, if they push, we push back.

Resistance to change is *natural*. Sabotage is *normal*. Even when it is carried out by the very people who asked you to lead them, sabotage is not the bad things that evil people do. It is the human things that anxious people do. Sabotage happens virtually *every time* a leader takes the initiative to start a change process. It's so intrinsically linked to



leading change that, as Edwin Friedman has written, “The important thing to remember about the phenomenon of sabotage is that it is a systemic part of leadership—part and parcel of the leadership process.”² And “the capacity of a leader to be prepared for, to be aware of, and to learn how to skillfully deal with this type of crisis (sabotage) may be the most important aspect of leadership.”³

This is true for every leader and in every leadership context. “If you are a leader, expect sabotage,” Friedman used to tell

his audiences. And indeed, in almost every change initiative that I have led, I have experienced sabotage firsthand.⁴

Sabotage is not the bad things
that evil people do. It is the human
things that anxious people do.

For some leaders, the experience of sabotage leads them to abort the change process. They have what Friedman calls a “failure of nerve,” and they cave to the pressure to stop any changes and maintain the status quo.

But I am guessing that since you are reading this, you don’t fall into that category. You, like me, could be someone who responds to sabotage and resistance with a “failure of heart.” In *Tempered Resilience*, I described a “failure of heart” as a time when the leader’s discouragement leads them to psychologically abandon their people and the charge they have been given. They stop the process of collaborating, of working together, of going forward together, and either become angry and emotionally disconnected or become dictatorial and controlling.⁵

A number of us were trained to believe that the challenges of leadership demand that we maintain control and project confidence under stress at all times. Often, we were even chosen for leadership positions because we can project confidence and command of a situation (even if we

actually don't have either!). We learned to meet resistance with determination, decisiveness, and displays of self-confidence. We learned to use power, status, and control to make sure that our plans were put into action. For those of us trained in this old "command-and-control" mindset, it is natural to assume that we must stand our ground for things to go our way.

You could be someone who responds
to sabotage and resistance
with a "failure of heart."

In reality, the moment that "command-and-control" leaders receive any pushback or resistance from peers or direct reports is often the moment they act in ways that make the situation worse. As Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic wrote in a 2013 article in *Harvard Business Review*, this pattern of using power to project confidence is particularly present—and problematic—in male leaders.

The paradoxical implication is that the same psychological characteristics that enable male managers to rise to the top of the corporate or political ladder are actually responsible for their downfall. In other words, what it takes to get the job is not just different from, but also the reverse of, what it takes to do the job well.⁶


For those of us trained in this old “command-and-control” mindset, it is natural to assume that we have to stand our ground for things to go our way.


Or, in the words of Marshall Goldsmith, “what got you here won’t get you there.”⁷

In a world of adaptive challenges, where learning, facing loss, navigating competing values, and experimenting our


ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES...

1. REQUIRE LEARNING 

2. RESULT IN FACING LOSS 

3. REVEAL COMPETING VALUES THAT MUST BE NAMED & NAVIGATED 

4. REQUIRE EXPERIMENTATION & FAILURE 

5. RESULT IN RESISTANCE THAT MUST BE FACED WITH RESILIENCE 

way to new solutions is required, the old command-and-control model is even more limited.⁸ Authority and power can only accomplish so much. While power can be used to stop evil, it is not effective in bringing transformation—which is the heart of adaptive change. Adaptive leadership focuses on *the growth of people to be able to face their greatest challenges and thrive*. It requires people to willingly, humbly learn new ways of being, go through their own personal shift in values, attitudes, or behaviors and make hard decisions to accomplish a larger mission beyond their own personal gain.⁹ And, by definition, adaptive change is what is needed when we *can't* bring change through best practices, personal credibility, command-and-control, or power.

While power can be used to stop evil,
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transformation—which is the
heart of adaptive change.

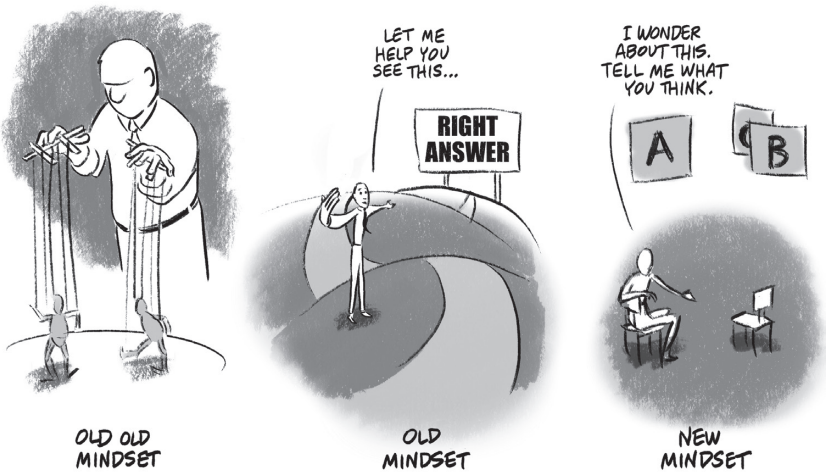
But what do we do when we are facing resistance and sabotage from our own teammates and colleagues and boards? How do we lead when our own people won't listen to our ideas or push back on our plans?

Don't eliminate resistance; lead through it.

Lead an emotionally intelligent process that *uses the pushback to bring buy-in*. Lead in such a way that invites those in opposition to the plan to engage it, make it better, and

own it. In other words, when facing pushback, don't keep pushing back; instead, invite your team to lock arms and use their energy to pull everyone forward.

This process is not manipulation or a covert maneuver to control a situation without seeming to do so. It's a process of genuine mutual transformation that starts in our deepest values and empowers our teams to be more fully engaged. It is born of the wisdom of a centuries-old peace movement, a martial art centered in vulnerability, and the insights that can be learned only in the most terrifying of situations.



MENNONITES, JUJITSU MASTERS, AND A HOSTAGE NEGOTIATOR

The Lombard Mennonite Peace Center was established in the 1980s with the mission of helping congregations learn and live out the principles of biblical peacemaking in the face of the nuclear arms race.¹⁰ Since many Mennonites have a commitment to peacemaking and even nonviolence, their original commitments made sense on an international scale. By the late 1990s, they were being invited by congregations to apply what they learned working within the peace movement and training on mediation skills to different sources of tension and conflict that arose *within* the church.

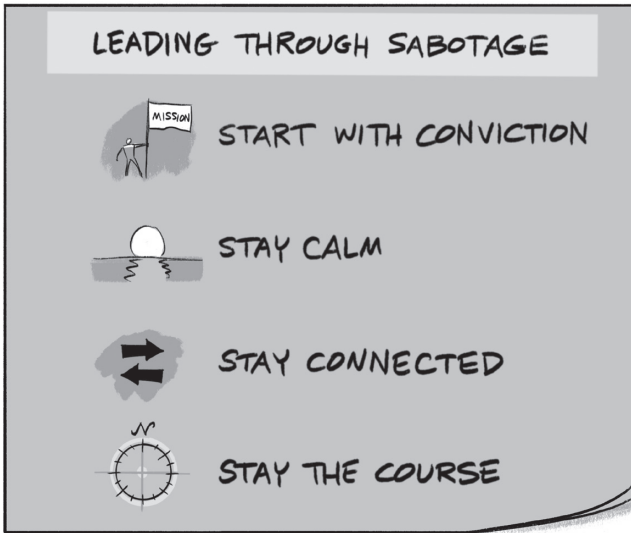
Led during that time by Richard Blackburn, they utilized Murray Bowen's family systems theory to help congregations develop the skills to resolve internal conflicts in a healthier way.¹¹ In their work with congregations, they seek to bring change in the midst of the natural resistance present in every relational system as people try to eliminate or mitigate against loss. They have developed a mantra that I have adapted for use in any organization that is attempting to bring change. I urge you to commit it to memory as we learn it together. Write it on a Post-it note and put it on your bathroom mirror, or make it your screensaver on your phone so you can look at it several times a day.

Start with conviction.

Stay calm.

Stay connected.

Stay the course.



Notice that the goal of the process is not to manipulate people into giving in (If you wanted to you could just use your power and authority to do that!). It is to move forward—*to stay on course with the necessary changes*—while giving the space for others to lower their resistance and join you in a new shared direction or initiative. There are no guarantees that this process will work, but through its measured, paced,

relational approach, it gives the best opportunity for a team to develop a strategy that they can all “stack hands on” and pursue together. Using insights learned from others who have worked with deeply resistant people, we’ll adapt each of these steps in the skillsets ahead.

The big mindset change is for the leader to stop pushing back on resistance, instead pulling people along into a mutual transformation process.

To understand that dynamic, we need to go from a Mennonite church to a jujitsu dojo.



**Don't eliminate resistance;
lead through it.**

David Hallgren is a chaplain and cofounder of a nonprofit ministry focused on reducing sexual violence against women.¹² He is also an instructor in the martial art of jujitsu.

Kelly Padgett is a Christian worker in the Philippines and, with his wife, the co-founder of an organization fighting sex trafficking. He also teaches jujitsu. While neither man knows each other, their common commitment to empowering women in the face of domestic violence and sex trafficking led them to embrace the martial art of jujitsu as a tool for teaching women self-defense.

“Jujitsu is a martial art that doesn’t depend on being big and powerful. It is a tool for small people to fight back against big people,” Kelly Padgett told me in an interview. “One of the first things to learn is how to ‘fight from your back.’ Everybody feels traumatized when they go to their back. Everybody is afraid of being dominated. In jujitsu, you learn that when you are in a vulnerable position, you can be calm and know that you have options from there. Just because you are in a vulnerable position doesn’t mean that you are in danger.”¹³

Hallgren also teaches his students to look for the opportunities to “work from positions that feel vulnerable” and use your opponents’ strength against them to get in a better position. “Your goal is to use incremental positioning in close proximity to create the space that gives you more options—including the option to get away.”¹⁴

As a Methodist pastor and jujitsu instructor, Robert Perales told me that he took up the sport when he was facing bullying as a younger and smaller man. “Jujitsu is for those who start

at a disadvantage. It teaches you how to better defend yourself from a place of vulnerability,” Perales said in an interview, echoing a common refrain. In jujitsu, “size isn’t important, what’s important is your opponent. If you know your opponent’s center of gravity, and what your opponent is using against you, you can take all of their energy against you and use it against them.”¹⁵

For Padgett, Hallgren, Perales, and the other jujitsu experts that I interviewed, that experience of learning how to use someone’s strength against them, how to turn vulnerability to an advantage, and how to create the space that enables you to make another move—or even get away completely—is what drew them to the sport.

Several of the instructors said that one of the keys to teaching jujitsu is knowing how to leverage space, to think strategically in the moment of stress, and to think of the sport as a kind of “human chess” that includes doing moves that would be completely unexpected in a match of sheer power. “Bring the enemy closer to you so they can do less harm,” Padgett teaches his often-bewildered students.

In talking to these jujitsu instructors, I recognized one of the moves that I had used as a high school wrestler: the arm drag. An arm drag is a move that requires you to stop trying to control your opponent’s strength by pushing them backward, and instead, receive *their pushing back against you*

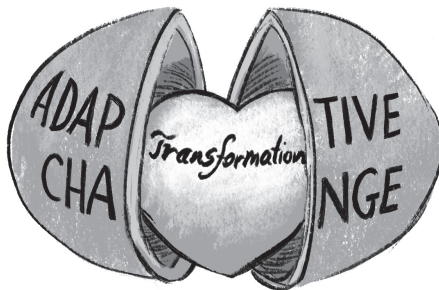
and use their momentum to *pull them by and move them where you'd like them to go.*

Don't push back,
pull them by.

When it works well, you find yourself in an unexpected place and in much more control of what has been a dangerous situation. As instructor Hallgren taught me, there is an inherent contradiction, even irony, to jujitsu that is surprisingly applicable to leadership: “The most dominant position is *behind* your opponent.”

As we will explore in more detail, the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center teaches that the key to keeping a change process moving forward in the face of resistance is not to get angry or distant, barking orders and leaving people alone to carry them out, but instead to *remain calm* and *stay connected* to those who are resisting you. In jujitsu we learn that even the feeling of vulnerability and moving closer to the one who may be attacking you can actually create the space to maneuver and guide the movement of your opponent into a better place.

In both examples, the one being resisted has to learn not to push back and meet force with force, but instead learn to engage the other in such a way that they end up *joining arms and moving ahead together.*



And the hostage negotiator? We'll get to him in a moment. But you may be surprised to know that the key to negotiating with terrorists begins with some famous words of St. Francis of Assisi.



BALCONY SESSION

EDWIN FRIEDMAN WROTE *that* SABOTAGE is "PART and PARCEL" of LEADERSHIP & THAT A LEADER

CANNOT FEEL TRULY SUCCESSFUL UNTIL SHE HAS MADE a CHANGE AND THEN SURVIVED the SABOTAGE *that* FOLLOWS.

- 1 HAVING REFLECTED in the LAST BALCONY SESSION on a TIME that YOU RECEIVED PUSHBACK to an IDEA, NOW REFLECT on a TIME in YOUR LEADERSHIP WHEN YOU EXPERIENCED SABOTAGE.



- 2 WHAT DID YOU FEEL WHEN SOMEONE ON YOUR OWN TEAM or THAT YOU ASSUMED WAS SUPPORTIVE of YOU RESISTED & EVEN THWARTED YOUR LEADERSHIP?



- 3 HOW DID YOU RESPOND TO IT at the TIME?

- 4 HOW DOES IT IMPACT YOUR LEADERSHIP TODAY?

- 5 HOW MIGHT the SKILLS of BOTH the

MENNONITE COMMUNITY & the JUVITSU INSTRUCTORS HELP YOU THINK ABOUT HOW YOU MIGHT RESPOND DIFFERENTLY NEXT TIME?



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