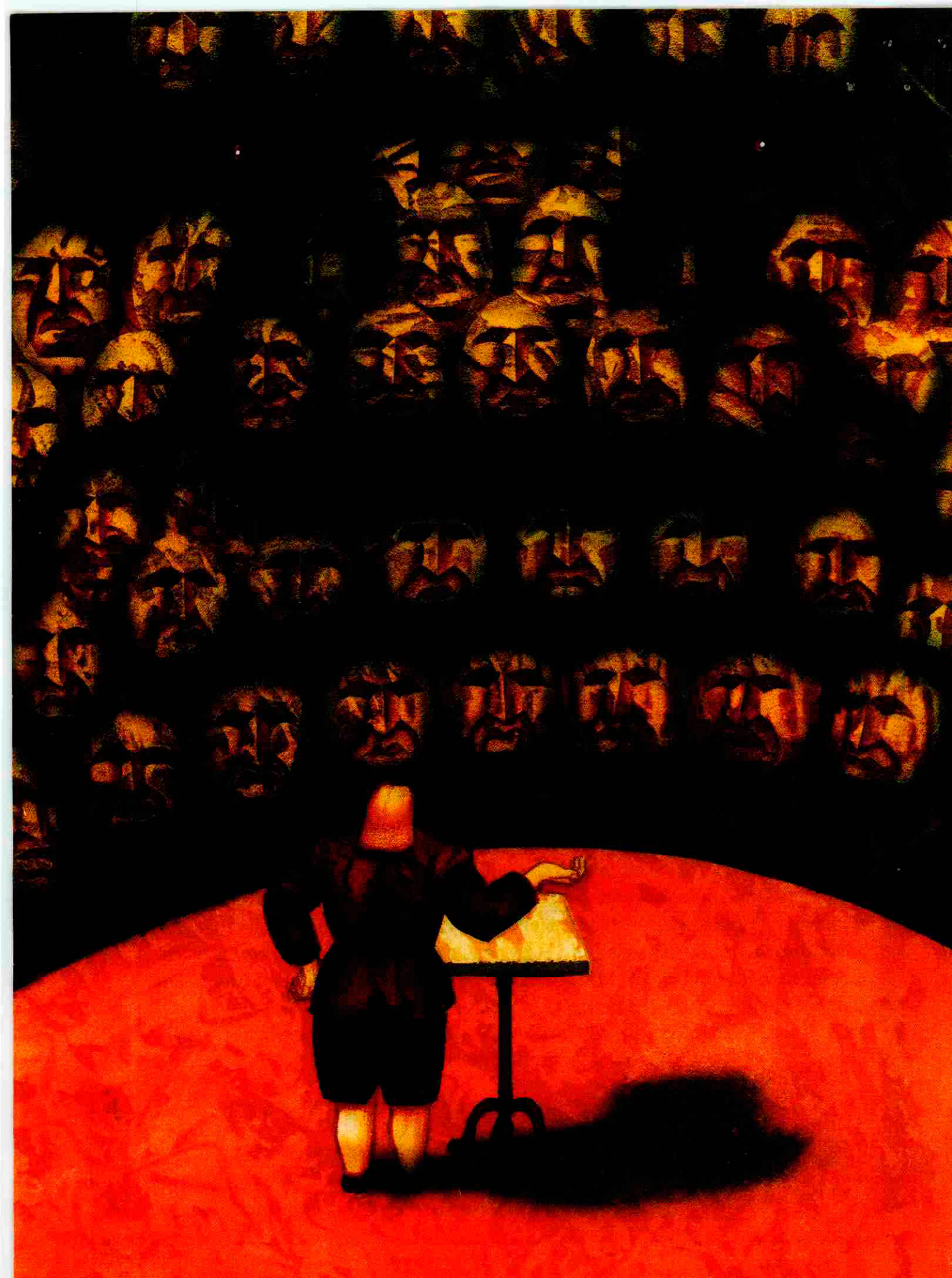
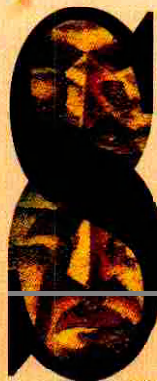




Transforming Resistance

AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER,
EVERY TRAINER FACES AUDIENCE RESISTANCE.
ONE WAY TO TRANSFORM IT IS TO EMBRACE—
NOT RESIST—THE FORCE OF OPPOSITION.
HERE'S HOW.



SOONER OR LATER, every trainer faces the test of resistance. For me, it came sooner than I would have ever imagined.

Soon after entering the profession in 1979, I was invited to run a three-day leadership workshop for middle managers. When I asked participants why they were attending, one sour-looking man replied, "Because it will put me three days closer to retirement." I laughed, not realizing he was serious. During that first morning, he seemed to have something bitter or sarcastic to say about everything I presented. Priding myself on my ability to trade retort for retort, I came back with my best material. M.A.S.H.'s Hawkeye Pierce was never so facile.

BY RICK MAURER

I did quiet him with my remarks. But in the process, I did something damaging: I made it unsafe for anyone else to speak. Participants seemed to be thinking: "If Rick could attack him, maybe he will pick on me next."

I had just met resistance and I had failed its test. I spent the next two days digging myself out of a hole that I alone had dug.

Since that unsettling experience, I have been intrigued by resistance in other people and in myself. I've been curious about what causes it and what makes it go away.

Resistance takes many different forms, and it arises in many different work situations. The best trainers are adept at spotting and working with it. Although their facility is sometimes intuitive and unconscious, the most successful trainers behave like martial artists keenly attuned to the energy directed at them. They adapt, step aside, and invite the force of opposition—not to humiliate and destroy, but to regain balance and harmony.

The nature of resistance

Resistance is a force that slows or stops movement. From the vantage point of the people resisting, there is nothing wrong with it. People resist to protect themselves from harm. When people attack a training class, it is seldom out of a deep-seated desire to make life difficult for trainers. More often, resistance is a response people use to protect themselves from something frightening—changes that rock the status quo, changes that disrupt familiar ways of doing things, changes that threaten people's status, and changes that even cost people their jobs.

By remembering that resistance is natural and protective, we can begin to see those who resist as normal human beings, with motivations similar to our



■ *People use resistance to protect themselves from something frightening* ■

you are senior management's lackey—and, by the way, they tried that before and it didn't work.

You feel compelled to respond. If you believe resistance is bad, then you are likely to choose a tactic that attempts to overcome, sidestep, or avoid the resistance. Here are some tactics you might use.

Power. You might pull rank in subtle, or not-so-subtle ways. You might remind participants that you, not they, have the ear of the CEO. You might demand that people attend class, whether they want to or not, so that you will at least have the chance to hammer home your points. Or, you might take a sly approach and include their compliance to quality improvement in their performance plans.

Force of reason. You look at the poor misguided souls in your class and assume that they are resisting because they just don't get it. You try to help them by providing facts, figures, and endless examples that prove your case.

I saw one presenter try to convince a group to accept his philosophy of quality improvement by barraging it with 75 technical overheads during a two-hour lecture. Sitting in the back of the room, I saw the opposite of ac-

ceptance happen. When one woman asked another what she thought of the presentation, she replied, "No matter how cynical I get, it's never enough to keep up." (Later, she told me that the line is from Jane Wagner's play, *Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, made famous by Lily Tomlin on Broadway.)

Ignoring. You forge ahead as if nothing had gone wrong. You believe that if you keep class participation low—show a lot of videos and lecture a lot—the resistance might die.

Giving in. You concede defeat by promising yourself that you'll never teach this course or any other again. You begin to think that taxidermy might make an interesting career move. Or, perhaps you give in by colluding with the class: "You know, you're right. Senior management is made up of clods and liars."

I have used all of those tactics and others with varied degrees of failure. They have a few characteristics in common.

Such tactics separate us from people who resist. The first three assume that we're right and the participants are wrong. The tactics also fail to engage people in a way that allows for the possibility that they just might have a point.

Such tactics increase resistance. When people realize that the trainers don't respect their opinions, they begin to build a wall between themselves and us. As we use more such tactics, we work hand-in-hand with participants adding bricks to the wall.

Such tactics can also create Pyrrhic victories. In 279 B.C., the Emperor Pyrrhus defeated the Romans at Asculum, but at a terrible loss of lives among his troops. He is supposed to have said, "One more such victory and we are lost." We can mandate that people attend training. We can punish them for not complying. But then, we often create fear and mistrust among the people we need to support new ideas.

The alternative

If we believe that resistance is natural and that the people resisting are doing it for a reason, then a host of other options open up to us. I've made my share of boneheaded mistakes in

dealing with resistance. But sometimes when the stars are aligned properly, I handle things differently. The day I encountered "The Class From Hell" was one such time.

As I walked toward the classroom, a colleague pulled me aside and said, "I had these people yesterday. They don't want to be here, and they're awful to work with. Have a nice day." My colleague had gotten my attention. But if the class is that bad, I reasoned, why not have fun? If I'm going to fail, I might as well enjoy the ride.

The class started at 8 a.m. Within minutes, people were reading the paper, talking among themselves, and doing everything they could to send the message that they wanted no part of the class or me.

As tempted as I was to use a default tactic, I tried something else. I said, "Folks, this is kind of a special day for me." I paused. People looked up. "Normally, it takes me an hour or so to lose complete control. But this morning, I did it in just five minutes." People laughed, and some even began paying attention.

I remembered that my job was to present material and help facilitate learning, not convince participants that any particular model is the Holy Grail. When people responded, I asked for more comments. Specifically, what didn't they like? I wanted them to help me understand the world from their points of view. Occasionally, I would reiterate a point if I felt that participants opposed it because I hadn't presented it clearly. But mostly, I wanted to learn more about how our views differed. I did not argue with their experience. If they said that something couldn't work in their organization, I did not argue. Soon, people gave me more time to present ideas. Criticisms diminished, and people started building on ideas instead of trying to discredit them without thinking them through. And I began learning about what it's like to work inside their organization.

Later, during a presentation of a leadership theory, one of the participants, whose name was Al, asked, "How does this relate to Myers-Briggs personality types?" I replied that I knew of no correlation. In a challenging tone, he said, "There has to be a connection." I reverted to default tac-

tics, using a mix of power and force of reason. In effect, I said, "I'm a trained professional. I keep up on the literature. I know my stuff."

He would have none of it. I realized the mistake I was making, backed off, and asked, "Al, what do you suggest?"

"We've all taken the Myers-Briggs and the leadership inventory. Let me see how they correlate," he replied.

I told him to go for it. Al got up and asked a few questions. Within a few minutes, he had completed his experiment. I asked him what he learned. He smiled and said, "There's no correlation." I admit that I did get some satisfaction from being right.

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But I wish he had found a connection. I would have learned something I could have used.

I tell that story to illustrate some important aspects about dealing with resistance.

One, never resist resistance. It is energy, and it is best to let it go its own course like a river.

Two, embrace resistance. Don't just get out of the way; invite its power. By "going into" resistance, you can learn its true nature.

Levels of resistance

There are two levels of resistance that can have an impact on your training. Level 1 is fairly superficial—as when people resist because they have more pressing business. Often, letting people get that off their chests reduces the resistance, and work can go on.

Sometimes, you learn that the resistance is deeper than initial comments lead you to believe. That is Level-2 resistance.

For example, some people in the "Class From Hell" were upset by what

they believed to be senior management's hypocrisy in sending them to class. Senior managers seemed to be saying, "This subject is important for you folks, but we don't have to comply with that so-called enlightened management stuff."

So, participants' resistance is not always to the subject; it can be to the conditions. If I try only to convince them of this theory or that, I may miss learning the true reason for their resistance.

Respect people who resist. An amazing thing happens when people are listened to with respect; they become candid. And, paradoxically, the more you respect their resistance, the more likely it is that the resistance will change into support.

The "Class From Hell" participants quit complaining and became engaged once they realized that I respected their positions. They were willing to work with me to try to identify which leadership practices might help them do their jobs more effectively, once they had identified all of the reasons that it was so hard to be a good manager in their organization and why courses like this one missed the mark.

The continuing challenge

Working with resistance is a constant challenge. Some days, I feel like a dancer, leading at times and then being influenced by my partner—finding that together, we are creating moves that neither of us might have expected. On other days it seems that my every move is a stumble. But even on the days when I am off-balance, I find that resistance is exhilarating. There is so much to learn.

I keep a T-shirt in my office given to me by that class. It says, "I survived the Class From Hell." That reminder keeps me going. If I could do it once, I can do it again. ■

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