

# Conflict And Resistance: Tools Of Understanding

## Fine-tuning your company's internal operations

By Roman Jimenez

Impossible deadlines, vague purchase orders, inaccurate bills of merchandise, demanding customers, unqualified workers and Uncle Sam making sure you properly dispose of chemical waste. Sounds like a typically stressful day at the office, doesn't it?

Actually, in this case it was a game, recently organized by Workplace Technologies Research, Inc. (WTR).

The exercise itself is modeled after a real-live workplace environment. A small group of participants are placed in the position of having to run a manufacturing business to see how they deal with all the endemic pitfalls. In this case, WTR had our group of 7 making and refurbishing refrigerators. Our scenario went something like this: we had just acquired a refrigerator company. Our mission was to take inventory, order parts, set up assembly, take new orders, establish accounting procedures, properly dispose of hazardous waste and turn a neat little profit. Every 20-minute interval represented a new work week and our group had to meet the weekly deadlines established by the orders we accepted. We were penalized financially if we didn't.

The WTR went to great lengths to make the exercise as real to life as possible.

There we all were, seven responsible, proven professional producers.

However, instead of turning a modest profit, we lost nearly \$10,000 in two simulated months. It wasn't pretty, but it was very educational.

The cognitive scientist behind this endeavor is Dr. Lia Di Bello, the president of WTR.

Dr. DiBello says the method works for three reasons. First, it helps the participants become aware of their "bad habits" (such as reactive planning) and the associated costs. Secondly, it helps them see the ways they misunderstand a new technology or business approaches. More often than not, this entails significant conflict during the exercise and processing an amount of personal resistance to change. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing.

"We think resistance is a necessary part of reorganizing old knowledge for a new purpose during the learning process,"

Di Bello said. "[Resistance] is a way of activating your entire set of senses into the learning process. So we use conflict as a means of education."

Dr. Di Bello has had good success with this philosophy, having recently completed the training over 3000 workers for the New York City Transit Authority. WTR had to train bus mechanics to use a software program to log the

diagnostic and repair service records for each bus the mechanics worked on. Prior to the training, the mechanics would repair whichever busses happened to be in their specific shop with very little record keeping. A system was needed, therefore, to track repairs on each bus, so that breakdowns could be better addressed.

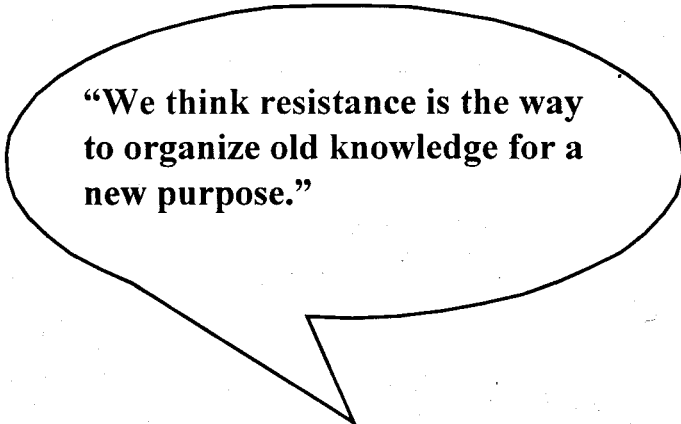
Dr. Di Bello said that at first, there was a lot of resistance. "But," she said, "that's okay. When people are willing, then their learning is passive," she says. The theory goes, if there is conflict and resistance, then the learning process itself is much more complete.

Now, Dr. Di Bello is working on a more universal training program that can "travel."

"For the mechanics, we actually developed miniature busses they had to work on and then input their work on the computer terminal." Dr. Di Bello says that sort of sight-specific detailed exercise is often required. However, there are other instances when time and funds don't permit such an elaborate set-up, where any generic manufacturing environment would suffice, hence the refrigerator exercise.

This exercise can even be used as a diagnostic tool, to find out just exactly where the problems are and how to fix them for a specific manufacturing company.

"A custom designed exercise can be expensive," Dr. DiBello admits, and for some companies that is the best approach. To learn more about WTR, email Di Bello at [liadi-bello@msn.com](mailto:liadi-bello@msn.com).



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