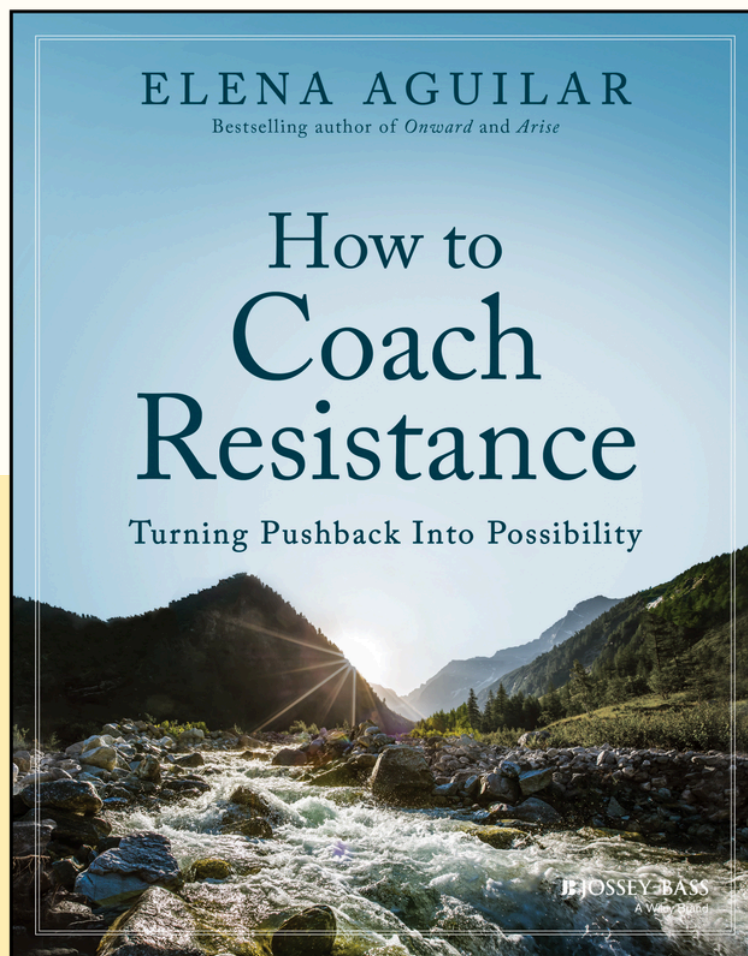


EXCERPT

How to Coach Resistance: Introduction



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Introduction: The Question Every Coach Is Asking

Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

James Baldwin

Sandra always wore a baseball cap, pulled down low so that she'd have to lift her chin up high to make eye contact. The first time we met, at the August teachers' PD days, she sat in the back, arms folded, glaring at me from below her cap. Every time I asked the group to do something—jot down a few words in response to this question, turn and talk to your partner, pick a quote to respond to—she moved in slow motion, as if she was in a different dimension.

I noticed all of this, and told myself to ignore it, not to focus on her, to keep my voice steady. She was a seventh-grade English teacher, and I tried imagining her as a student—I didn't get reactive with students. But she was a grown-up. And for three days, I thought she did her best to communicate her dislike of me. Her not-wanting-to-be-there. Her devotion to not engaging. How else was I to interpret her loud and exaggerated sighs, or her one- or two-word answers?

I gave her space. I felt like she was just waiting to challenge me, so I didn't directly approach her or call on her — except for once, when someone needed a partner, and I saw that she didn't have one, and I said, "Sandra, would you mind partnering with ___?" At the end of those three long days, as I was gathering supplies and teachers were packing up, she approached me and said, "I really didn't like that you told me to partner with ___. I felt offended. I felt like you were treating me like a kid. Don't treat me like a kid."

I was tired and taken aback, and still I found some reserve of calm and said, "Thank you for that feedback. I'm glad you told me. That was not my intention." I doubt, however, that my tone communicated genuine gratitude. I was irritated.

I drove home that evening replaying the three days. Not the teachers who had engaged, asked questions, and welcomed me. But Sandra. I kept thinking about Sandra. I told myself that some teachers are just resistant and there's nothing you can do. I told myself I would figure out how to break her.

That was the goal I brought to my first full-time coaching position. Not to understand Sandra or find out what she needed, but to break her.

I feel a knot in my stomach as I write those words and show you who I was then.



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What I know now, after twenty years of coaching educators and training coaches, is that the impulse to break someone is exactly what makes resistance worse. Resistance requires two forces: it emerges in the interaction between one person's protection and another person's push. When I was trying to break Sandra, I was supplying one of those forces.

I didn't know that yet.

Sandra and I battled for two years.

Our skirmishes took place in whole-group staff meetings, department meetings, and one-on-one coaching sessions. I dreaded seeing her. I was relieved when she was out sick. I alternated between resolving that I would figure out how to break her and wanting to hoist up my white flag and quit.

Sandra was not the only teacher at that middle school who did not want to be coached.

There was Kat, who wanted me gone. Kelly, a second-career first-year teacher who made it clear she thought she could do my job—and the principal's—better. Jackie, who often dozed off in department meetings and rarely followed through. Mary, who told me she couldn't be "made" to meet with me and would file a union complaint if I tried.

Very few of the teachers at that school wanted to be there. They openly disparaged the students they taught. They hated "the district." They didn't respect the principal. The assistant principal didn't respect the principal either, or the students, or their families—and she made all of this known. I had walked into something I didn't have a name for yet: a toxic organizational culture, years in the making, the accumulated sediment of resistance that had never been addressed.

To my colleagues at the school I'd left, and to other coaches, I'd bemoan the situation.

"I have never experienced resistance like this," I'd say. "I have no idea what to do."

This was my first full-time instructional coaching position. I had taught for twelve years, but I had no training as a coach and received no support that first year. My motto—which I kept to myself—was *resistance is futile*. This was a reference to the Borg from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, who were trying to take over the universe and assimilate everyone.

I was determined to conquer resistance.



I was not successful with Sandra. Or with Kat, or Kelly, or Jackie, or Mary. I think I destroyed that possibility early on, in ways I didn't yet have the awareness to see. But I learned so much about myself from working in this school. I saw unexamined aspects of my personality, gaps in my emotional intelligence, and patterns in the way I responded when I felt ineffective, afraid, or ashamed. I learned that my reactions were part of what made the situation so difficult, and I realized that I could influence more than I thought.

What Resistance Is Telling Us

How do you coach resistant teachers? was the question I obsessed over those first two years as a coach. I now understand that I was asking the wrong question.

To start with, that question is unanswerable because resistance isn't a quality teachers have. It is a *response*. When I asked how to coach resistance, I was treating resistance like a wall to break down rather than a signal to read.

The question I needed to ask was: *What is this teacher's resistance telling me?*

Because resistant behavior is the tip of the iceberg. When we explore it, we uncover emotions, unmet needs, beliefs, histories, power dynamics, and institutional stories that long preceded the current coaching relationship.

Problems Of Change Are Problems Of Learning

One idea organizes everything in this book: Problems of change are problems of learning.

When a teacher pushes back against something new, that pushback is almost always a problem of learning—a gap between where they are and where the work is asking them to go, and fear about crossing it.

If you make one change in your practice as a result of reading this book, let it be this: change the questions you ask when you encounter what you perceive as resistance. Stop asking, *What do I do about them?* And ask these questions instead:

- What are they trying to learn, and what is standing in their way?
- What might they be afraid of?
- Which of their core human needs might feel threatened right now?
- What happened to them in this school, in this district, and in the coaching relationships that came before mine, that I am inheriting?

And underneath all of that is another essential question:

- What is my *own* resistance telling me?

Because coaches bring resistance too. Every time you walk into a session with a story about who this teacher is and what they are capable of, every time you feel frustration when someone doesn't do what they agreed to do, every time your curiosity fades and you become Borg-like—that is your resistance meeting theirs. What you experience as someone else's resistance is actually a co-constructed dynamic—it's your reaction to their behavior, your feelings about their feelings, your fear about their fear.

The questions I'm posing, and the reflection I'm insisting we engage in, requires us to slow down, look inward, and learn new skills. If we want to create the kinds of schools and communities that I believe many of us ache for, slowing down is not optional. Looking inward is not optional. Learning is not optional. Addressing resistance will require that we shift many of our behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being.

The Impact on Children

My first book, *The Art of Coaching*, came out in 2013. After its publication, I began delivering trainings on coaching. And from the very first one, I was asked the same thing, multiple times in each training: *How do you coach resistant teachers?*

The question came from coaches, department chairs, mentors, assistant principals, and principals. They worked in rural, urban, and suburban schools, in private and public schools, in the United States and Spain and Canada and Mexico and Kenya and dozens of other countries. And the educators all had a similar expression on their faces when they asked the question—one I recognized because I'd had it too. It was a blend of frustration, sadness, desperation, hope, resignation, and exhaustion.

Underneath this question—how do you coach resistant teachers?—are other questions that have little to do with technique:

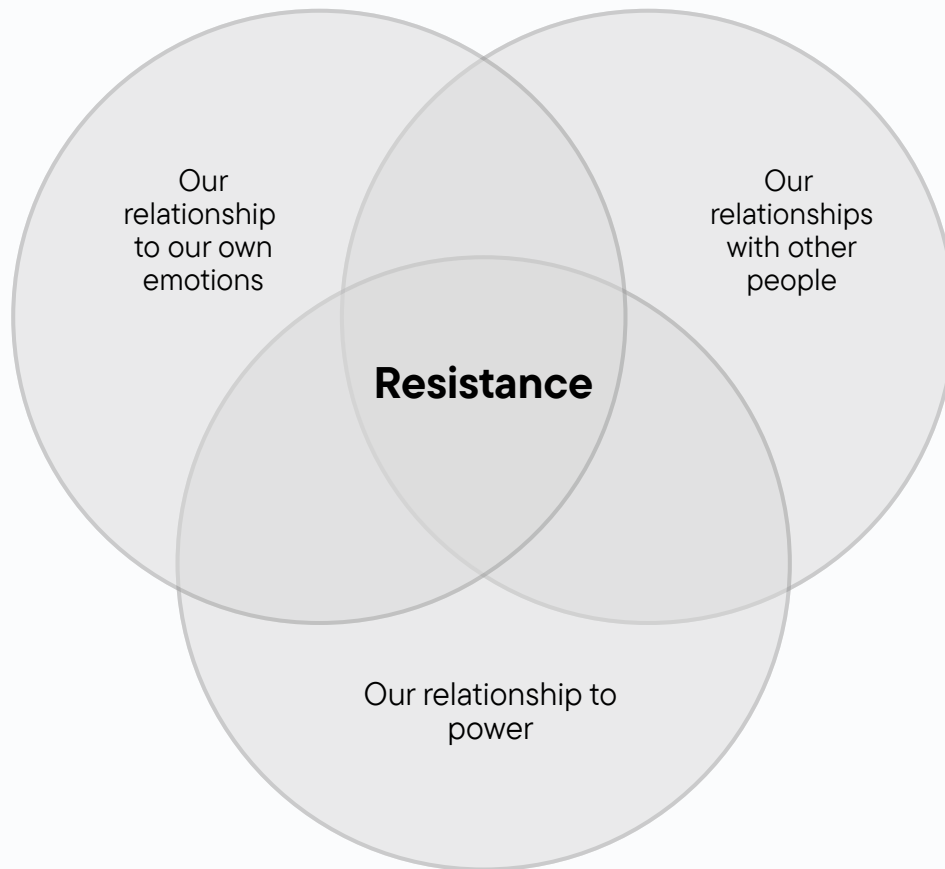
- Can I stay in relationship with someone who seems to be doing everything possible to push me away?
- Can I keep showing up with curiosity when I feel frustrated, dismissed, or ineffective?
- Can I sustain myself inside systems that are sometimes broken, unjust, and exhausting?



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What these questions have in common is relationship. Resistance always involves three relationships at once: our relationship to our own emotions, our relationships with others, and our relationship to power. It lives where the three overlap (Figure I.1). To get better at resistance is to get better at all three.

Figure I.1: Where Resistance Lives



For those of us who work in and with schools, these relationships have consequences for children. Resistance has consequences for children.

Resistance shapes culture. It affects how adults speak to one another, whether they are willing to learn in public, whether trust can grow, and whether people feel a sense of shared purpose. In schools where resistance hardens into cynicism, compliance, withdrawal, or chronic conflict, it becomes nearly impossible to create the kinds of professional communities that children need adults to build. Children experience the consequences of what adults have not been able to create or repair.

Let me be really clear about this: the resistance of adults negatively impacts children.

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Addressing resistance, then, is not only about helping teachers feel less defensive or helping coaches feel more effective. It is about improving teaching and learning. It is about creating schools where educators stay open to growth, where trust and courage make collaboration possible, and where adults model the emotional intelligence, resilience, and humanity we want children to experience every day.

When we learn to recognize resistance accurately and respond to it skillfully, we strengthen organizational culture and instruction. We make it more likely that teachers will remain in the profession, that they will find meaning and satisfaction in their work, and that children will experience classrooms led by adults who are supported, reflective, and fully committed to helping them thrive.

These are the questions at the heart of this book: how do we stay in relationship with each other? How do we respond skillfully to what we perceive as resistance? And how do we create the conditions for adults and children to thrive?

The good news is that resistance is not the immovable obstacle it feels like in the moment. Resistance is information. Once you know how to understand it, everything changes. You stop trying to overcome the resistance and start getting curious about it. You stop asking, *How do I get this teacher to change?* and begin asking, *What is this resistance trying to show me?* When your questions change, you'll feel more empowered and hopeful. And you'll see a whole lot of next steps you can take.



How to Use This Book

That August PD was where I first met Sandra—in a room of forty teachers on the first day back after summer break. Which means the first overt resistance I faced as an instructional coach happened in front of everyone.

If you have ever been at the front of a professional development session and felt the group turn against you—felt the energy drain out, watched the arms fold, heard the sighs—you know this particular pain. The strategies that work in one-on-one coaching conversations do not always translate to a room of forty teachers.

This book addresses both contexts: the one-on-one conversation with the teacher who pushes back on everything you say, and the group context when you're facing a staff that pushes back before you have said a single word. Some of the strategies you will need are the same. Some are different.

If your job involves helping educators grow, this book is for you. You may be an instructional coach, a department chair, a mentor, a principal, an assistant principal, a district leader, or a facilitator of professional learning. You may spend most of your time in classrooms, in coaching conversations, in staff meetings, or in districtwide professional development. The title matters less than the responsibility.

If you support adult learning, you have experienced resistance. You have probably felt defeated by it, confused by it, and maybe personally hurt by it. You have probably also, if you are honest, contributed to it—the way I contributed to Sandra's.

You will not find a protocol for “handling” resistant teachers in this book. You will find a way to understand what you are looking at when you experience resistance, and frameworks for responding with more accuracy and care. You will also find stories, sentence stems, reflection prompts, and anecdotes from schools where these strategies were applied.

This book offers you three primary tools: ACE, the Core Human Needs, and the Gaps Framework. ACE will help you work with the emotions underneath resistance. The Core Human Needs will help you understand what may feel threatened for the teacher in front of you. The Gaps Framework will help you diagnose what is actually getting in the way of growth. These tools work together. If you're familiar with my work, then you have come across these before in my books and trainings on Transformational Coaching. And if you're new to my work, you will meet them in the chapters ahead.



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This book will ask you to look at the teacher in front of you, and it will ask you to look at yourself. Both are required.

You will be asked to notice what happens inside you when a teacher frustrates you, what stories you tell yourself about why they are not changing, and which of your own fears are getting activated. This kind of metacognitive work is core to Transformational Coaching. You must start with yourself.

And you must practice.

Reading is the beginning, but the skills this book describes cannot be learned only from a page. They have to be practiced out loud, with other people, in spaces where someone is observing you coach and offering you feedback. So read this book — read it with colleagues and talk about it. Then try the language. Notice what happens in your body when someone pushes back. Practice slowing down. Practice getting curious. Practice choosing who you want to be before you decide what to say.

Sandra is one of the teachers I often think about. When I coached her, I couldn't see her fear. I couldn't see her needs. I couldn't see my own resistance. I have coached teachers like Sandra since — teachers whose first instinct is to push me away. Some of those teachers I have been able to reach. A few I have not.

What is different now is that I know what I am looking at when I meet them. I know that the work begins inside myself. I cannot always predict what a coaching relationship will become, but I can always choose who I will be inside it.

I've learned to see below the resistance. I've learned to ask different questions. I've learned to recognize the fear, the threatened needs, the old stories, the institutional histories, and my own contribution to what happens in a coaching relationship. I've learned that when I attend to all of that, something changes — not always quickly, but enough so that I trust this work completely.

I can teach you how to see what is below resistance, how to create the conditions in which someone can be vulnerable and open, and how to become a coach who can stay steady when someone is afraid. More than any technique, this work asks you to look past what a person is doing to who they are, and to believe in them when it would be easier not to. Maybe not every time. But with more compassion, more courage, and far more curiosity than I knew how to bring to Sandra.



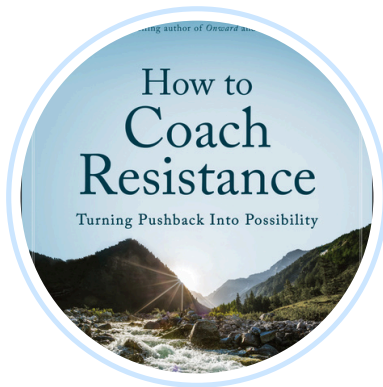
A Note on Language and Anonymity

- I often use the term *client* to refer to the person we coach. I don't like the sound of the word, *coachee*.
- I use the traditional pronouns, *he* and *she*, and in recognition of nonbinary gender identification, I also use *they*.
- Some of the stories in this book are almost exact transcripts of coaching conversations, edited only for brevity and readability. Others are composite conversations—necessary to preserve anonymity or to provide useful examples.
- To protect the identities of people I've coached, I've changed all names and identifiers.



WHAT'S NEXT

Keep Learning with Bright Morning



Get Your Copy: [How to Coach Resistance](#)

Learn how to recognize what resistance is really communicating, coach through difficult emotions, and create the conditions for meaningful change. Filled with stories, tools, and practical strategies, this book will change the way you understand—and respond to—resistance.



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.

Curious what this could look like for your team?
Schedule your [complimentary consultation](#).



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