

Classic SF Paper

Introduction to 'Resistance Revisited'

Kirsten Dierolf

De Shazer, S. (1989). Resistance Revisited. *Contemporary Family Therapy* 11 (4), 227–233

“Resistance Revisited” is a short and very readable paper by Steve de Shazer in which he describes the story of the original paper “Death of resistance” (de Shazer, 1984) and gives some really valuable clues on the construction of useful theories. Actually, if you substitute “resistance” in this paper with any exemplar of a not-so-useful reified concept like “motivation” or “change”, you’d have a good idea what to do with it and whether to continue using it. “Resistance revisited” is a much clearer and easier read than the original paper and a very valuable resource.

I’m still impressed by Steve de Shazer’s tenacity. “Death of resistance” was rejected 17 times and revised 6 times. It took de Shazer over 5 years to have it published and he did not give up. Today, I think, we should follow his example in this respect. We should be clear about what we stand for, strive for academic excellence and we should keep talking to our neighbours in related fields (even if our theories differ and we see things in different ways). SF was put in the world slowly, tenaciously, against the odds with creativity and a good sense of humour. SF as a method for organisational change today has come far and many courageous people have contributed (see for example McKergow, 2011).

In “Resistance Revisited” Steve de Shazer tells the story of how resistance was buried under the tulip patch in Steve de Shazer’s garden (p. 228). He confesses: “I murdered it because it had outlived its usefulness” (p. 228) and states that

resistance had moved from “metaphor to fact”. Instead of understanding sentences like: “It looks like the client is resisting” as a description or metaphor, people came to reify the concept. Instead of a description of an interpretation of a situation by the therapist, it came to mean something “out there”, something that really happens or exists like a refrigerator, for example. Sentences like: “We have to deal with the client’s resistance” became meaningful.

In our daily lives as organisational consultants or coaches, we encounter many concepts which underwent similar changes: “motivation”, “team roles”, “change curve” “personality profiles”: I can no longer count how often I have heard sentences like “I am more red than yellow and therefore ...” in my business coachings. Instead of a metaphor, a classification of similar personal traits, the “profile”, has become an adjective like “you are wearing a blue jacket”. I argue that these kinds of not so useful reifications should be put down humanely and share resistance’s cold grave. Steve de Shazer’s article can show us how.

The first questions to ask are: “What does the concept do? Where is it used and what for?” Resistance’s natural habitat is the situation in which a consultant wants to explain why something does not change even though he or she put in a lot of effort for it to do so. It is a way for the consultant to avoid the feeling of failure.

The second question is: “In which way is this concept useful for the desired outcome?” Here, sadly, it is quite obvious that the concept of resistance is not so useful – it positions consultant and client on opposite sides instead of strengthening the alliance.

The third question is: “If the concept is not useful for the desired outcome – which concept could be more useful?” Any concept should describe and explain how to get to what is wanted and not what is not wanted. Positioning “co-operation” as the operative concept is much more useful than explaining why there is no or little co-operation. In describing and theorising about co-operation consultants look for what they are doing together with their client that works. No

blame is attached to either party if the interaction does not work perfectly from the start. The process is described as an emergent, co-constructed process.

These three questions sound very simple – but imagine we combed through the standard repertoire of consulting concepts this way. Try it out with the above mentioned “motivation”, “team roles”, “change curve” “personality profiles”. It could be a fun and useful exercise.

As Steve de Shazer quotes Wittgenstein: “In theory construction ‘it’s always a matter of the application of a series of utterly simple basic principles and the — enormous — difficulty is only one of applying these in the confusion our language creates . . . [Interestingly,] the difficulty in applying the simple basic principles shakes our confidence in the principles themselves’”. (p. 229)

References

- De Shazer, S. (1984). The death of resistance. *Family Process*, (23), 11–21.
- McKergow, M. (2011). Solution-Focused Approaches in Management. In C. Franklin, T. Trepper, E. McCollum & W. Gingerich (Eds.), *Solution-Focused Brief Therapy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.