



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

S E R I E S

THE SUMMARY OF LEADING THROUGH RESISTANCE

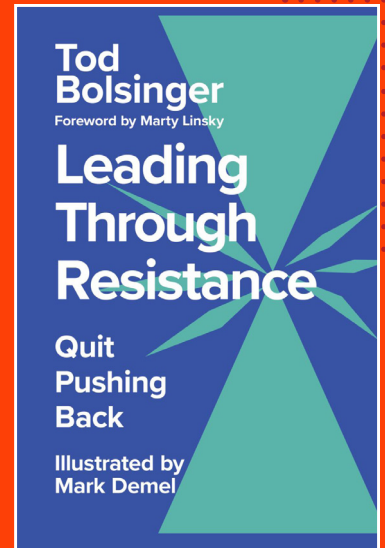
By Tod Bolsinger
IVP 2024

Introduction: Jerks & Control Freaks

When the going gets tough, most leaders freak out. We like to imagine we'd stay calm and creative, but under fire we become little Caesars determined to get our way. Research calls this "threat-rigidity," which Columbia Business School professor Rita McGrath explains occurs when we're "under threat" and "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."

In these moments, leaders often double down on old methods, demand compliance, and try to restore control—just when adaptive leadership is most needed. Situations that require innovation and experimentation inevitably provoke resistance from our own people. Their pushback can heighten our sense of losing control, fueling a vicious cycle of tightening our grip and generating even more resistance.

Edwin Friedman wrote, "Resistance ... is part and parcel of the leadership process," and sabotage should be seen as "a systemic



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tod Bolsinger is the vice president for vocation and formation and teaches practical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. He has also served as senior pastor of San Clemente Presbyterian Church and associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood.

Published by Study Leadership, Inc. 1N010 Prairie Path Lane, Winfield, IL 60190. No part of this document may be reproduced without prior written consent.

© 2025 Study Leadership, Inc. All rights reserved

Find more summaries at convenebooksummary.com

phenomenon connected to the shifting balances in the emotional processes of a relationship system.” Recognizing that resistance is a normal response to change can help us lead more constructively.

However, leaders who have long relied on charisma or sheer will may find this realization jarring. We may need a much deeper process of personal formation to develop the resilience required to guide our teams through pushback. Ultimately, 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 transforms both us and our organizations to face ongoing challenges

1. A Leadership Story

When Pushing Back Sets You Back

“Maybe I was too hard on her.” As he shaved in the early morning, Carlos Soto replayed last night’s conversation with his eleven-year-old daughter, Christina. She was quickly becoming a protégé at her jujitsu academy, impressing everyone by grappling with kids almost twice her size.

Last night, her instructor showed her an arm-drag technique: “When he starts pushing you, grab his arm and use his energy against him.” In the car home, Carlos reminded her, “If you push on someone, they push back. But if you feel their push and use their effort, you can pull them where you need them to go.”

Christina was determined. “I want to control him and get him to tap out.”

Carlos tried to stay calm. “You are strong and work hard, darling, but you are also stubborn. You won’t listen to your coach. And not me, either.”

She folded her arms, glaring out the window. Carlos shook his head.

“Like father, like daughter?” he thought later, rinsing off his shaving cream.

An hour later, his young sales associate Jordan poked his head into Carlos’s office. “Most of us never saw you and Mac in such a tangle,” Jordan said, gesturing toward a photo of Christina in her gi. “You two were like black belts going at it, trying to make the other submit.”

Carlos thought back to yesterday’s meeting. Mac, his most trusted teammate, had pushed back against a new strategy Carlos believed the company badly needed. When the argument dragged on, Carlos finally said, “If you can’t do this, I can find someone who will.” Now Mac’s door was shut, the office uncommonly tense.

Carlos used the chance to coach Jordan: “When you’re ready to launch an initiative and someone on the team resists, you have to stand your ground. When they push, you have to push back.”

Jordan shifted in his chair. “You always say we should ‘disagree and commit.’ How do you tell the difference between that and someone who’s just resisting your leadership? Does that matter?”

Push, pushing back. Push, pushing back.

Pulling by.

Like daughter, like father.

“That’s a really good question,” Carlos said. “We’ll talk about it, but I have something I need to do.” As soon as Jordan left the office, Carlos scribbled himself a note to call his mentor, Terry. He needed to talk this one out. Then he reached for his phone and typed a text to Mac: *Hey there. Wondering if we could get some coffee late this afternoon. I’ll buy.*

2. Old Mindset

Don't Let Them Push You Around

"I keep thinking that this is really great training—and—I don't know anybody who can actually do this."

That sigh came from a United Methodist District Superintendent after my workshop on adaptive leadership. The "this" he meant was facing internal resistance: the soul-sucking, morale-killing opposition we get from our own people when attempting change.

An entrepreneur told me how her biggest client turned on her branding company when that client's own team resisted a new strategy: "She just fired us, and it was the most undeserved firing ever." Losing 40 percent of their income nearly ended her small business. Still, she reflected, "My identity doesn't hinge on what happens in this project."

Yet most leaders, when faced with sabotage—what Edwin Friedman calls "the human things that anxious people do"—fall back on a command-and-control mindset: "If they push, we push back." Some even suffer a "failure of heart," giving up on their people or abandoning real collaboration. But adaptive leadership requires transformation, not just top-down power. What got you here won't get you there.

Instead of using force, we can lead through resistance. The Lombard Mennonite Peace Center teaches a mantra worth memorizing:

- 1. Start with conviction.
- 2. Stay calm.
- 3. Stay connected.
- 4. Stay the course.

We don't manipulate people into compliance; we walk with them to lower their resistance and join you in a new shared direction. That path involves embracing resistance to move forward together.

Jujitsu offers a vivid parallel: rather than fight force with force, you "pull them by" and use your opponent's energy to guide them to somewhere better. "The most dominant position is behind your opponent," one instructor notes—gaining advantage through calm control rather than brute strength.

Remember: *Don't try to eliminate resistance; lead through it.*

3. New Skillset Part 1

Start with Two Shared Convictions

Andrew Zolli, who has studied global disruption from the coral reefs of Palau to the back streets of Palestine, defines resilience as the "capacity ... to maintain ... core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances." Real crisis threatens what is most valuable—our reason for being—so genuine resilience demands we discern what should never change.

Whenever my team works on an organizational change effort, we start by clarifying *what should never change*. Some energetic leaders find this disappointing; they'd rather "think outside the box" and skip straight to fresh ideas. But, as Jim Collins and Jerry Porras famously said, "*Once you are clear on what will never change, you then must be prepared to change everything else.*"

This requires a dual conviction:

- 1. **Preservation conviction:** We will protect and maintain our organization's core purpose and values.

2. **Change conviction:** Because of shifting circumstances, we must adapt—even our most cherished ways—to preserve that core purpose and integrity.

Here's how it looks in practice:

- A beloved local restaurant embraces delivery and takeout during a pandemic to remain a “positive source of encouragement” in the neighborhood.
- A church, committed to loving neighbors, starts Spanish classes so longtime members can connect with new immigrants.
- A literacy nonprofit adopts tech tools to reach students used to gaming and social media, making mentorship more accessible.

The first question about leading change is not about change but about what will not change.

Inevitably, resistance will arise. People experience *any* change as loss—especially those most invested in the current mission. Rather than minimize the disruption, effective leaders anticipate emotional push-back. As one Midwest prison manager advises, “Go first at the resistant,” inviting them into the conversation. A small business owner shared a similar approach: “I used to start with those who would be most receptive. Now I start with those who are least receptive and get them working the problem with me.”

Marty Linsky says, “Begin by acknowledging the losses—that’s step one.” Chris Voss calls it an “accusation audit”: naming the toughest objections yourself before others can. For instance, a college leader launching online courses might say, “I imagine you’re afraid we’ll ‘dumb-down’ the curriculum” or “lose our sense of community.” Putting these concerns on the table lowers resistance and invites honesty.

The prison manager told me, “Most of the time, I actually agreed with them. I listened. I acknowledged the truth in what they said.” His motto: “You have to ask for a heart before you ask for a hand.”

4. New Skillset Part 2

Stay Calm, Curious & Connected

For most leaders, the necessary changes we bring will make our team’s emotions run hot. “Asking for a heart,” as the prison manager said, is about acknowledging difficulty and pain upfront. Whenever we ask people to upset the status quo, conflict can feel ready to spiral out of control.

Both risk-averse responses and controlling reactions are ineffective. If we become angry or avoidant, neither approach accomplishes our goals. The more defensive, more hurt, and angrier we get, the more resistant people become, and the more trust erodes.

Leaders *must* manage their emotions. When we start feeling our own internal temperatures rise, we need to intentionally stay calm. Anger and stress prompt poor decisions. As Daniel Goleman notes, “When emotionally upset, people cannot remember, attend, learn, or make decisions clearly.” Overly anxious people revert to primitive ways—fight, flee, or freeze—instead of working together on adaptive solutions.

Staying calm doesn’t mean having no emotions. Rather, it’s being so self-aware that your response addresses the real issue, not the anxiety swirling around it. Managing your own reactivity helps everyone else stay grounded, keeps the focus on solving challenges, and expands the group’s capacity to see possibilities.

Look for learning. Instead of asking, “Did it work?” ask, “What did we learn?” Under high stress, confirmation bias kicks in, and we notice only what fits our

perspective. Remaining curious helps us discover insights that strengthen the strategy and move the team forward.

Finally, stay connected. As the prison manager and small-business owner discovered, distance increases distrust. Even if people criticize or send angry emails, the best move is to get closer—invite them for coffee, pick up the phone, or hold a meeting. “Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer,” as The Godfather 2 puts it.

Staying connected to those who resist lets you keep influencing the system toward health. Build trust, increase rapport, and together, you’ll find a way that brings everyone along.

5. New Skillset Part 3

Give the Work Back & Stay on Course

The third skillset needed to keep from being a leader who depends solely on power to get his way is to “give the work back to the people” while insisting that everyone also stay the course on the two convictions.

Ronald Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grawshaw define “giving the work back” as when an authority figure refuses to take all of the responsibility for a decision but instead creates the process where everyone responsible for a decision—and the resultant strategy—participates in and owns the work together. This is critical to adaptive change because the ultimate goal is to create *adaptive capacity*: “the wisdom, courage, and resilience within a people to learn and survive the losses necessary to be transformed and accomplish their mission in a changing world.” As Ronald Heifetz puts it, “How a culture of dependency can transform into a culture of widely distributed leadership” is the question, and the arena for this capacity-building is *conflict*.

The reason conflict is so important is that a team cannot achieve *commitment* without it. People will not actively commit to a decision if they haven’t had the opportunity to provide input, ask questions, and understand the rationale behind it.

At the heart of this stage—“give the work back to the people”—is inviting them to engage the decision wholeheartedly and trusting that *pushback leads to buy-in*. In fact, effective leadership teams expect each member to help make the idea the best it can be, then stack hands on a direction and commit to it. This approach, called “disagree and commit,” is based on the belief that genuine commitment requires candid discussion. Candor and healthy disagreement don’t prevent us from supporting a decision once it’s made.

Patrick Lencioni encourages leaders not just to tolerate conflict but to “mine for conflict”: welcoming opposition, insisting on candor, and rewarding pushback. This helps avoid “destructive hallway conversations” and ensures the team hears every perspective. After that, the authority figure performs one of a leader’s “most important responsibilities: breaking ties.” Once the group has weighed in, the leader can finalize the decision and expect everyone to support it—even those who initially disagreed.

The dual conviction of preserving core purpose and making necessary changes is ultimately about making the changes. “Disagree and commit” requires a commitment to keep going forward. And the pain of change includes the possibility that some may find it impossible to commit, leading to a painful parting of ways. As Marty Linsky reminds us, we must name the losses and help people navigate the changes we’re convicted to make.

A successful contractor and real estate developer described how staying the course led to the dissolving of a twenty-year partnership. “We realized that

our values had changed. The disagreement brought clarity that we could no longer be partners.”

He was asked if it felt like he was firing his partner. “No,” he said. “I never fire anyone. I just keep clear on what our values are. And I am willing to let them know they may grow unhappy here. Often, they self-select out.”

6. Adaptive Reset

Attunement Accelerates Change

Two masked men storm a bank in Brooklyn. A militant group in the Philippines kidnaps an American. In Haiti, the elderly aunt of a politician is abducted during a spree of kidnappings. At the center of all these crises was the FBI’s lead international kidnapping negotiator, Chris Voss, who learned that the best place to begin in even the most high-stakes standoffs is with the principle sometimes attributed to Saint Francis: “Seek first to understand and then to be understood.”

Rather than pushing back with power, Voss focuses on **attunement**—connecting, letting them speak first, listening deeply, and utilizing empathy. Emotional intelligence (EQ) researcher Daniel Goleman has shown that “nearly 90 percent of the competencies that distinguished outstanding performers was attributable to emotional intelligence factors.” True adaptive change, then, relies not on coercion but on creating a deep sense of understanding and trust.

Attunement is a “precognitive, intuitive, emotive process of human connection” that starts before rational thought. Our decision-making begins with intuition and emotion, what psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls the “elephant,” while our rational mind is the “rider.” To foster change, leaders must connect with that elephant first.

Research on mirror neurons has revealed that when

one person mirrors another’s words or emotions, both brains fire in similar patterns, creating a genuine connection. Goleman writes, “Leadership is not domination, but the art of persuading people to work toward a common goal.” This approach fosters psychological safety and empathy, which lowers defenses and encourages collaboration.

One manufacturing executive discovered this when the company offered to provide tools for workers who previously owned their own. The workers resisted. Only after one employee explained that his customized tool cart was “my office” did the leaders realize they were threatening his sense of identity. Understanding this hidden issue enabled them to move forward by providing lockers where employees could display personal items.

Chris Voss calls this “tactical empathy”: understanding the feelings and mindset of another in the moment so you increase your influence. It’s about caring personally, challenging directly, and being with people as they face the losses that come with change.

The adaptive reset—stopping the old habit of meeting resistance with more resistance—begins when we choose attunement. Here are a few practical steps:

- 1. **Slow it down.** The Marine Corps maxim “Slow is smooth and smooth is fast” reminds us not to turn urgency into frenetic action. Listen, gain trust, and understand, so people will eventually stop pushing back and start working with you.
- 2. **Get clear on two convictions.** Clarify what must never change (core purpose/values) and what must adapt in a new context. This “preservation conviction” plus “change conviction” guides people through disruption.

- 3. **Give the work back to the people.** Involve key stakeholders early—especially those who might resist—so they have genuine input, ownership, and responsibility.
- 4. **Give an accusation audit.** Name all the possible objections or fears at the outset, creating psychological safety that lowers defenses.
- 5. **Practice mirroring.** Repeat back important words, tone, and emotions, aiming for the other person to say, “That’s right.”
- 6. **Look for the unexpected and unknowns.** Be humble about “unknown unknowns,” staying open to insights that arise through honest engagement.
- 7. **Use the safety of “no.”** A genuine “no” is better than a “counterfeit yes.” It clarifies boundaries and builds mutual respect.

“In every agreement,” Voss says, “the result comes from someone else’s decision.” By addressing fears and showing empathy, you encourage a real, “commitment yes.”

Attunement accelerates change because when people feel understood, they lower their resistance and consider joining the work of transformation. As you resist pushing back, you begin to “pull” your team forward, creating an environment where everyone can lock arms and move ahead together.

7. The Story Continues

Back to the Mat

“Mackenzie? Soy latte extra shot and a black Americano for Mackenzie?”

“Those are mine,” she said, returning to the table. She checked her watch, only to see Carlos entering, cell phone in hand.

“So sorry, Mac,” he said after hanging up. “Marta got

pulled into an emergency meeting. I need to pick up Christina at Jujitsu after we’re done. Hey ... didn’t I say I was going to buy?”

“Yeah, but I got here first. No big deal, Boss.”

He sat down. “We’ve known each other twenty years. Only Jordan calls me that. And yeah, yesterday was kind of a big deal. We don’t often tussle like that—especially not in front of the team.”

Mac gripped her coffee cup more tightly. She had been worried ever since his text that morning. She’d even come in late, hoping to avoid him until she could strategize.

“I owe you an apology, Mac,” Carlos said suddenly.

She froze in mid-sip. “Wait. What?”

“I was out of line yesterday. And I’m sorry.”

She set down her cup, relieved to see the Carlos she knew: a passionate leader who could admit mistakes. It was why she had left a bigger corporation to join his startup.

“Thank you,” she said. “I really appreciate that. I know you carry the emotional weight of the company. If you want us to go in a certain direction, it’s my job to get us there.”

He smiled. “You get us there every time. But one of the reasons is that you look at the potential obstacles first. So, how about we give yesterday’s conversation another try?”

Mac nodded. “As I was saying, this isn’t a bad idea, but ...”

He almost interrupted, then stopped. “As you were saying, our team is tired—barely recovering from the pandemic. You wondered if we have the bandwidth to take on something new. Is that right?”



“Yes,” she said. “I’m not against your idea. I felt like you weren’t hearing my concerns.”

“You’re right. I was so worried about our future that I just dropped it on you. I skipped our usual process, so you felt ambushed. Is that right?”

“Ambushed is a good word.”

Carlos nodded. “Let’s start over. Completely honest. You tell me everything. And we already have that first big obstacle on the table: maybe we don’t have the bandwidth.”

Mac felt her defenses fall. “The more I think about it, the more I hope we can do it. I’m just not sure about the timing.”

He repeated softly, “It’s about the timing?”

“Yes, that’s right,” she said, relieved he was really listening.

“Well, that’s why I need you. Your sense of timing has saved us more than once. So, where do we start?”

She smiled. “Remember Terry’s favorite question? ‘Do you know the difference between being wrong and being early?’”

They both laughed. “Nothing!”

Mac pulled out her iPad. “We may be a bit early, but not much. I ran some numbers, and I have a few thoughts on what we may need to do.”

Thirty minutes later, they walked out together. Mac overheard Carlos dictating a text to Jordan: “Can you come by in the morning? I want to correct something I said and tell you a story about what my daughter and I are learning at her jujitsu class.”

