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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Navigating resistance in leadership training

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Abstract

This article offers an introduction to leadership training contexts, what resistance is, how resistance can show up in leadership training contexts, stories of resistance in leadership, and what practices might address resistance in these training contexts. Resistance can be described as a critically conscious act, whether verbal, cognitive, or physical, in which the act is in opposition to either someone or something. It is essential to understand the context in which the resistance is happening, as well as what is being resisted and who is involved in the act of resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning are rife with complex issues. While many of these issues are entwined in larger systems that can be challenging to tackle, leadership learning that is generative and developmental is one way to address complex systems present in our society (Hastings & Sunderman, 2019). Further, leadership education and development resonates with and is applied well, when training, orientation, and ongoing support are included.

Research indicates when students are engaged in leadership training, it increases their self-efficacy (Dunbar et al., 2018), critical thinking, problem-solving, multicultural knowledge, and sense of belonging with their community (van der Meer et al., 2019). Therefore, training and development is imperative for leadership learning (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). However, leadership training is contextually based on cultural, social, political, developmental, and environmental factors. As such, this article will offer an introductory conversation into leadership training contexts, what resistance is, how resistance can show up in leadership training contexts, stories of resistance in leadership, and what practices might address resistance in these training contexts.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING CONTEXTS

In the current United States context, conducting leadership training can be challenging. Particularly in United States higher education, educators and trainers may navigate mandatory training in leadership contexts, such as required training to hold a student government leadership position. Moreover, higher education institutions are also navigating laws banning diversity, equity, and inclusion training, such as safe zone training or inclusive leadership pedagogy (Asmelash, 2023), that connect to leadership training and development. While this article considers resistance in many forms, the emergence of resistance can be the embodiment of unreadiness, disengagement, unawareness, or discomfort. On the contrary, resistance can also be an engaged resilience that seeks to resist harmful content or violence in learning spaces. Resistance can also be a critical turning point or signal for deeper engagement (Moore, 2007). While these juxtapositions are at polar ends of the spectrum, the connection across the forms of resistance is the embodiment and response or outcome of training (Tolman & Kremling, 2017). Therefore, we underscore embodiment is essential to recognize in leadership training relative to resistance responses.

Leadership training and who trains

This article speaks to several audiences, including leadership educators and trainers, administrators, community leaders, practitioners, and developmental coaches of leadership learning. We acknowledge this audience is situated in several locations within and outside of postsecondary education. As leadership educators and invested partners strive to cultivate curricular and co-curricular spaces within postsecondary and higher education institutions, many contexts exist. One reality is that in co-curricular spaces, staff members and administrators are directly responsible for hosting leadership training and developmental spaces for students (Jenkins & Owen, 2016). These spaces can be institutional or within community spaces and are present in several microenvironments like community organizations, college, school, department, and student organizational levels.

Further, leadership development and training are often offered at a programmatic level based on the needs of the area. While these educators and trainers may or may not be defined by a title, they serve in student-centered roles with a focus on student leadership, such as coordinating, supporting, or training for student council positions, student ambassadors, or student officers (Dunn et al., 2021; Teig, 2018). We name the complicatedness of who facilitates leadership training to illuminate the context in which training takes place, thus highlighting how resistance in leadership training is contextual. In the subsequent section, we define more about resistance, the various types relevant to leadership training contexts, and contextualize leadership training with resistance.

DEFINING RESISTANCE AND TYPES OF RESISTANCE

Resistance is often viewed as either a problem or an opportunity related to learning (Moore, 2007; Winkler & Rybnikova, 2019). When seen as a problem or a barrier, it must be managed or anticipated to reach the training aims. When resistance is viewed as an opportunity or a catalyst for learning, it can be cultivated, developed, and addressed constructively. Conceptualizing resistance can be challenging and is dependent on the positionality of who is defining the term (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Like leadership, resistance is socially constructed and complex (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). In addition, resistance occurs in leadership training environments in multiple directions, including student to leadership

educators, students to each other, and leadership educators to students. We ask you to pause and consider your relationship with, reflections on, and understanding of resistance. Consider your multiple political and social locations, role in leadership training contexts, and beliefs about resistance.

What constitutes resistance?

Resistance can be described as a critically conscious act, whether verbal, cognitive, or physical, which is in opposition to either someone or something (Garrett & Segall, 2013; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). This act can be individual or collective. For example, it could include students resisting being an active contributor to the learning environment (Bishop et al., 2014; Cárdenas & Garza, 2007) or resisting content in training focused on diversity or multiculturalism (Bigatti et al., 2012; Jackson, 1999; Springer, 2014). The authors often and readily apply critical pedagogy to their teaching and learning environments, and thus, an entry point to considering resistance is Giroux's (1983) conceptualization of student resistance in classroom pedagogy, drawing from sociological interpretations.

When reading about educational applications of resistance, scholars often draw from psychological understandings, which frequently perpetuate a discourse of blame on students' oppositional behavior to specific teacher actions (Giroux & Robbins, 2006). However, universities, as educational institutions, "…structure the experiences of subordinate groups," (Giroux & Robbins, 2006, p. 35) and require an understanding of how resistance challenges inequitable social practices. Giroux and Robbins (2006) stated, "Resistance in this case redefines the causes and meaning of oppositional behavior by arguing that it has little to do with deviance and learned helplessness, but a great deal to do with moral and political indignation" (p. 35).

In other words, resistance is often predicated on an emotional response—anger, frustration, and outrage—to unfair, unjust practices, structures, and systems. These acts can happen in overt or agentic ways, more subversive ways, or might not be known by the resistor that their act is one of resistance; however, the social conditions and structures must be contended with to understand how the oppositional behaviors resist or further perpetuates oppression. Stewart and Williams (2019) offered definitional nuance to what is perceived as activism to include daily acts of resistance. These acts disrupt the pervasiveness of oppression and take many forms, both overt and covert (Stewart & Williams, 2019).

Resistance can be identified as an agency, and resistance can contribute or respond to exercising power. In training contexts, traditionally, the facilitator has a great deal of authority and has the power to make decisions related to the curriculum, which influences the social practices within the training. As previously described, patterns of resistance are based on one's positionality. Students can be resistant when there is a mutual responsibility for learning (hooks, 1994). Facilitators can resist embracing co-learning and committing to shared power in their relationships and the knowledge being constructed in training (Wiborg, 2018). Addressing systems of oppression and drawing attention to inequitable structures can also be resisted by facilitators and students (Filax, 1997). Stewart and Williams (2019) contended, "… all activism is resistance but not all resistance is activism" (p. 214).

Jackson (1999) found oppositional behaviors to multicultural training through student avoidance, adverse transference reactions, resistance to course content, and silence. When training content highlights systems of oppression and challenges students' worldviews by drawing attention to the individual and social consequences of maintaining those systems,

TABLE 1 Resistance types.

Resistance type	Did the individual or group resisting identify the act as resistance?	Is it recognized as resistance by the targets of the resistance?[a]	Is it recognized as resistance by other members of the community?
Overt resistance	Yes	Yes	Yes
Covert resistance	Yes	No	Yes
Unwitting resistance	No	Yes	Yes
Target-defined resistance	No	Yes	No
Externally-defined resistance	No	No	Yes

Note: Adapted from Hollander and Einwohner (2004).
[a]Targets of resistance can be individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, social structures, and so forth.

it can result in a range of emotions and associated behaviors (Beatty et al., 2021; Wiborg, 2022). Shedding light on the underlying motivations would entail considering the broader social context within which the behavior occurs. It is essential to understand the context in which the resistance is happening, as well as what is being resisted and who is involved in the act of resistance.

Types of resistance

Hollander and Einwohner (2004) found it useful to develop distinct types of resistance to understand the interactional nature of identifying resistance in a community. For something to be considered resistance, does the actor need to know they are opposing some kind of exercise of power and intend to do so (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004)? Hollander and Einwohner (2004) stated, "Although there is virtual consensus that resistance involves oppositional action of some kind, there is considerable disagreement about whether resistance must be intended by actors and whether it must be recognized by targets and/or observers," (p. 544). Considering and broadening who is involved in judging or identifying resistance is a useful framing for several reasons.

First, it expands our understanding that resistance can be identified by multiple individuals and associated roles in your context (actor/resistor, target, and observer/community member). For example, as the facilitator, you may be the target of a student resisting an activity by visibly removing themselves from the workshop. The student represents the actor/resistor doing the oppositional behavior which may or may not be viewed as resistance by others in the workshop who also noticed the oppositional behavior.

Second, by considering the ways these perceptions intersect, we can identify the source of resistance in hopes of making change and addressing inequitable social practices in our training environments. Third, it places resistance in the social context and highlights the complexity of resistance. While Hollander and Einwohner (2004) presented seven types, we have adapted and selected five to consider when applying them to training contexts, including overt, covert, unwitting, target-defined, and externally defined resistance. Table 1, describes each of these types and if the resistance was intended by the actor, recognized as resistance by the target, or observed as resistance by others in the context.

Leadership training contextualization and resistance

Contextualizing leadership training helps inform how participants interact with content, environments, people, relationships, culture, and society. When educators contextualize

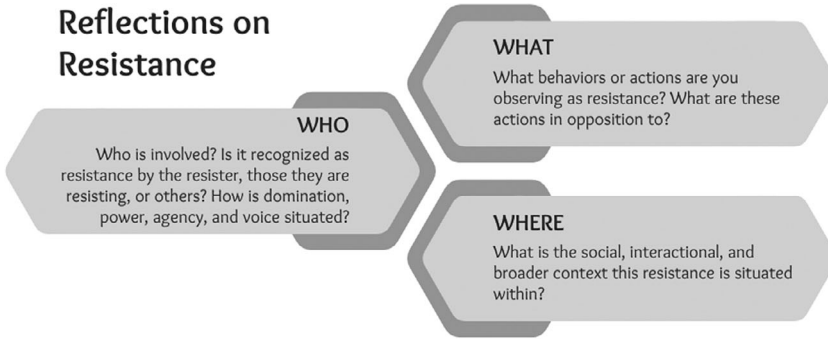

FIGURE 1 Reflections on resistance.

leadership training, it helps trainers and educators understand what participants resist and why they may resist in the moment and within the leadership training environment. As mentioned earlier in this volume, leadership training is defined as accessing and acquiring skills related to leadership while developing applied knowledge (Allen & Roberts, 2011; Kroll, 2023; Priest & Jenkins, 2019). Weng and Gleason (2021) posited the criticality of using contexts like students' lived experiences to engage in the leadership learning process. This means a participant's lived experiences intersect with their knowledge and application of skills, leaving room for resistance to emerge.

For example, when we understand a participant's social location (who), we can understand why they may embody resistance to a particular curriculum not inclusive of their social identities. This context provides an informative viewpoint of what the participant might be resistant to and why (what). Leadership educators engaged in training should consider these contexts when planning curriculum and content to hold space for resistance (i.e., where). Holding space for resistance can be pausing, steering into it, or avoiding damaging content through inclusive leadership training contexts. In Figure 1, we offer question prompts to reflect on the context: who, what, and where. As we transition in the next section into narratives of resistance in training, we invite you to consider these prompts in the scenario.

RESISTANCE IN LEADERSHIP TRAINING STORY

Leadership training story context

Recently, in a mandatory leadership development training for more seasoned professionals, I (Amber), the trainer, found myself thinking deeply about the context for which I was designing an engaging curriculum over 3 days. The training included 25 participants who were interested in working on a leadership credential for their professional roles, much like professional development. The department received a grant to fund their staff to take the training; therefore, this was fully funded and supported, but not required, by the department. During the planning process, I created a survey to get to know the participants and their needs. This moved me to collect the who, what, and where of the group to develop a curriculum for the training that was meaningful and relevant.

After reviewing their feedback on the survey, one context to consider was that many of the participants had valuable and valid experiences with their professional positions for many years. Further, the social locations of the group were racially, culturally, geographically, and gender diverse. Knowing these participants were advanced professionals and

were coming from a range of diverse experiences and identities, I had to think deeply about the content. The curriculum connected to the certification I was teaching slanted more toward a novice to the certification. This was required by the organization I was representing. Therefore, it could be perceived as surface-level or introductory.

Resistance moment

Even with immense preparation and consideration of lived experiences, during the in-person training, a participant expressed verbal and body language of resistance when engaging in the training curriculum. Cues like arms crossed, adverse facial expressions, and passive-aggressive questions (e.g., asking questions that targeted specific individuals in the group, prefacing questions with demeaning comments) that critiqued the content and my (the trainers) approach were red flags that illustrated kinds of overt and covert resistance to the material and delivery.

Response and outcomes

While I had felt that I created a space for buy-in and reflective content that validated the participant's lived experiences, this response felt more like a big rejection of the material that was mandated and presented. The participants then retreated from being present in large group conversations, and when they were involved in smaller group work, they became hostile to other participants, critiquing and complicating the smaller group. They berated the content and critiqued the trainer's approach.

Key takeaways

While educators and trainers can attempt to plan for resistance in participants, it is usually to avoid it. There are times when resistance is a turning point for learning. In this case, as a trainer, even though I planned to avoid resistance from seasoned professionals, it did not happen that way. As trainers, we cannot misinterpret or dismiss resistance. In the case of this training, the participant was there for another 2 days, and to move past the stagnate and negative energy, there needed to be a reconciliation and understanding of further contexts to readjust to their needs.

This pause and reflection helped me, the trainer, see more about what they were communicating through their resistance and how I might adjust the content to align with their social location and perspectives. For example, I adjusted content to better meet participants where they were at with familiarity with the content. While I assumed all were more advanced, some were not familiar with the training content, which fostered their resilience. In addition, I adjusted content that reflected more globalized perspectives and culturally relevant examples based on some of the cultural identities reflected in the group.

LEADERSHIP EDUCATOR PRACTICES IN RESPONDING TO RESISTANCE

The narrative shared in the previous section is an important reminder of the resistance experienced in leadership training settings. Facilitators and participants alike experience

the physical, mental, and emotional impact of a resistance moment, and how those moments are tended to can significantly impact learning and development from the training experience. It is important also to acknowledge that engaging with resistance in training spaces can also have a personal impact on individuals' perceptions of self and others beyond the learning and development outcomes of the training. For these reasons, we are also compelled to share the reminder that navigating resistance is not about achieving compliance or restoring power dynamics.

We hope that practices and considerations such as those provided in this article can guide facilitators and participants toward greater understanding, criticality, and compassion through the often disorienting and uncomfortable feelings experienced with resistance in training spaces. While there is no prescriptive method for addressing all types of resistance, we aim to provide general practices for consideration when navigating the complexities of a resistance moment in the context of leadership training.

Pause and consider before taking action

Some of the most important skills facilitators can develop toward navigating resistance comes from the literature on emotional intelligence; emotional awareness and regulation (Goleman, 2005). These skills refer to our ability to engage in metacognition to notice what we are feeling, analyze why we might feel it, and consider the context before choosing an external response. Harnessing these skills can help us calm our minds and hearts when experiencing the emotional jolt that often accompanies a moment of resistance, offering us the space to breathe and consider various factors before moving forward with facilitation.

Before choosing a course of action, facilitators will want to consider not only what was said or done to express resistance but the context of the space. For example: Who is in this space, and why are they here? What identities are present in this space, and how have those identities been named either overtly or covertly in this action of resistance? How am I reacting in this moment, and how have others in the space reacted? What power dynamics are present in this space, and how has power shifted due to this act of resistance?

Facilitators should also further consider their positionality in the space. For example: In what ways has this act of resistance impacted me? What knowledge or experience do I have related to this moment of resistance, and what might I not know or understand? What power do I have in this space, and how is that power being experienced by others at this moment? What opportunity is there for me to empower others in this moment?

Additional consideration should be given to the purpose of the current conversation or activity, the training overall, and how the act of resistance impacts learning and development. For example: What outcomes have been interrupted by this act of resistance? What outcomes have been enhanced by this act of resistance? What opportunity does this act of resistance present for our continued growth as a learning community? What training plans can we adjust to make space for the unexpected learning and development this act of resistance can provide for us?

All three modes of self-inquiry discussed here are crucial for facilitators navigating moments of resistance in a training experience for two key reasons. First, they serve to make sense of the feelings, thoughts, and impact associated with the resistance. Second, and key for advancing to action, is that these lines of self-inquiry help prompt a mindset shift from thinking of the moment of resistance as a problem to be addressed toward an opportunity to be embraced. We do not intend to imply that a moment of resistance is not without its challenges and potential harms, which must be tended to appropriately. At the same time, acknowledging the holistic impact of a moment of resistance can help facilitators choose a course of action with developmental and equitable outcomes rather

than reinforcing the systems and structures challenged by those engaging in the act of resistance.

Strategies to try

With the goal of creating more developmental and equitable spaces in mind, we offer the following strategies for facilitators to try once they have engaged in the self-inquiry described above.

Collectively pause and acknowledge

One of the first actions a facilitator may want to take is to explicitly pause the action in the space and name that there is a feeling of resistance occurring. This confirms for those engaging in resistance that their concerns have been heard and confirms for other participants that what they may be feeling is valid and shared amongst others in the space. It also can help those who may not have picked up on more subversive forms of resistance recognize what has occurred and re-engage in the space with a keener sense of awareness. After prompting the pause, facilitators may want to invite participants to reflect on their thoughts and feelings at the moment through quiet reflection, pausing to jot down notes for themselves, and so forth. Depending on the form of resistance, facilitators may want to prompt participants with a reflective statement such as, "Since hearing this person's story, what are you thinking and feeling? How might you consider responding or reacting?"

Prompting participant self-inquiry

If deeper reflection feels appropriate or needed for the space, facilitators could invite participants to engage in a process of self-inquiry using prompts like those described in the section above for facilitators. Deeper reflection is constructive when the moment of resistance has caused tensions to run high and individuals to react immediately in ways that are more harmful than helpful for attending to harm and advancing collective understanding. If a goal is to work toward empathy development, then reflection on impacts related to self, others, and context is crucial (Shankman et al., 2015). These reflective actions align with tenets of critical self-reflection, which is necessary for social perspective-taking that leads to increased understanding of and empathy with others (Dugan et al., 2013). The metacognitive processing that occurs during critical self-reflection results in new ways of knowing, being, and doing (Mezirow, 2000), all valuable and ideal outcomes from an experience of resistance.

"Try this on" or "what if"

When resistance is communicated regarding a concept or idea, facilitators may want to suggest a "try this on" moment with participants. This pedagogical approach invites the community to suspend their judgment temporarily and embrace the challenging concept or idea, using the support of the learning environment to explore a new way of thinking, being, and/or doing when consequences are relatively low; training spaces are designed for this kind of experimentation. This is particularly important for leadership training environments since they present prime opportunities to uplift leadership narratives beyond dominant cultural norms. For example, propositions of leadership as a process connected

to justice and equity aims or the impact of systems of power and oppression on leader/ship development can be challenging for participants situated in a society with individualistic and meritocratic values. Providing an opportunity for participants to consider the potential of broader and more inclusive forms of leadership can be transformative (Rocco, 2017; Rocco & Priest, 2023; Wiborg & Ford, 2024).

The proposition of "what if?" can be used similarly to "try this on," but may be more applicable framing for situations where a personal story or experience has been shared with which other participants may not identify and/or find challenging to accept. "What if?" invites participants to consider for a moment that what this person has said is true and real, even if they have never experienced or interpreted a similar situation in the same way. Facilitators can prompt further reflection from participants with considerations such as: What is the context in which this person is situated (i.e., social location), and how might that inform their interpretation or perspective in the story shared? How does this person's narrative differ from what I have experienced or heard related to this same issue or topic? What commonalities or connections can I find with my own experience? Whose experience does this narrative acknowledge, and whose experiences are limited by it? (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Facilitators should also prompt participants to think through ways to engage in dialogue with the person who has shared the story or experience they find challenging. The goal is for participants to honor the reality of a person's lived experience, while simultaneously recognizing the limitations of individual perspectives, and exploring broader social patterns and assumptions of which the story may be illustrative.

This kind of pluralistic thought requires a heightened level of cognitive complexity with which some participants may struggle, but again, the training context provides an appropriate opportunity to practice with ample space for reflection, as well as coaching and support from the facilitator and peers. This also helps facilitate an understanding of "…how power, resistance, and human agency can become central elements in the struggle for critical thinking and learning" (Giroux & Robbins, 2006, p. 40). When using the "trying this on" and "what if?" prompts, facilitators should emphasize that participants are not required to change their minds or adopt a new thought or approach in perpetuity. Rather, participants should reflect on how this temporary exploration makes them feel, any new insights gained, and how the concept or idea may be useful in their daily lives. While some participants may have realizations in the "try this on" or "what if?" exploration that immediately changes or expands their thoughts, feelings, and actions, others may still be skeptical, which is an acceptable reaction. Experimentation in this way can catalyze later growth and development beyond the context of the current training experience.

Practices like those described in this section help resistance moments become a part of the learning and development experience rather than detracting from the experience or, more seriously, demoralizing or dehumanizing individuals engaged in the resistance moment. This reframe is critical when navigating resistance as facilitators, moving us closer to a culture of growth and possibility in community with others.

CONCLUSION

A primary task of student leadership trainers is to deliver impactful and inclusive content related to specific leadership roles, positions, or tasks. This responsibility can only be managed by understanding contexts, group dynamics, and forms of resistance in learning. This article provided foundations for naming, centering, and understanding contexts in leadership training related to resistance. We operationalize resistance and surface the types of resistance that may emerge in leadership training contexts, along with stories of

navigating resistance. Finally, we offer strategies for addressing resistance in leadership training.

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