

## **Position statement – “Overcoming Resistance” ASEE Software Engineering Process Improvement Workshop, 2002**

Overcoming resistance to change can be a big challenge, but it’s a crucial skill for any successful change agent. Here are a few points I’d like to make on the subject.

### **Resistance is good**

Would you like to work in an organization where all of your ideas are accepted without challenge? I wouldn’t! We’re not perfect, and resistance can serve as a safety mechanism for those occasions when our suggestions really aren’t a fit for the organization. Finding resistance means that someone thought about what I’m proposing, which means I’m past the big hurdle of getting people to care in the first place.

### **Speed limit of change**

Some people know how to successfully make sweeping changes across an organization in a short period of time. For those of us who don’t, we should obey the speed limit of change. There are a limited number of changes that an organization can normally absorb in a given period of time. Except in extreme situations, we should be happy with steady step-wise improvements.

### **Choose your battles**

There are always many opportunities for improvement in an organization. You shouldn’t fixate on one of them when you meet legitimate resistance that you can’t overcome. In the time it takes you to stubbornly push your change through, you could have implemented two or three other changes instead. As an example related to my “Bug Tracking Story” presentation, I had decided that we needed to separate the databases for internal software vs. outsourced software, and I felt strongly that this would streamline the bug tracking process. But my team resisted, and when I escalated to the SQA director, he also resisted. There were legitimate pros and cons. I decided to back off and focus on other concerns.

### **Be neutral**

If you meet resistance with resistance of your own, the results can get ugly. Take a neutral stance and act as a facilitator between two positions. Granted, this is easier for an external consultant than an insider with a vested interest in the results.

I learned much of what I know about overcoming resistance from Jerry Weinberg. For more information on the subject, see his book *The Secrets of Consulting*.