

LAYING GROUNDWORK FOR CHANGE

Change involves loss; to face loss is to grieve. Recent jobs remind me that groups who know how to grieve together can build organizations together. Why? When people acknowledge their reactions to change, they discover connections that lay the groundwork for building their future.

From the beginnings of a transition, leaders should tell everybody what the changes are, not once, but throughout the process. Your reaction may be to protect your employees from the messy aspects of change: unanswered questions and limited ability to predict outcomes. "I'll wait until I can unveil a complete picture," you might reason. But protecting employees also isolates them from you and from each other.

Two other factors complicate change. First, we may fail to acknowledge grieving. Secondly, we may fail to recognize that those who initiate change have more control, whereas some of those who have the change imposed on them are feeling resentful and angry.

Even with facts in hand, managers in a manufacturing plant with whom I've been working could not focus upon new responsibilities until they took time to air their reactions. Impending changes were being imposed by the courts, and they needed to say that they were angry, resentful, even helpless.

The space for creating the future was, for the time being, full. As long as we are using energy for denial, grief and anger, we can't move on. If you hear people saying, "let's not get emotional about this," or "let's just be objective," or "just do your work," listen for denial. These comments stifle frank dialogue that builds the connections employees need in order to embrace change.

In a large non-profit that my colleague Mary Fillmore and I worked with, folks had trouble moving forward because they were not focusing on stresses, both in people and organizational structure, caused by shifts in Federal grants. We needed to clear a space by listing changes outside and inside the organization, and then hear how everyone was reacting.

After several hours, folks began to realize that difficult behavior in meetings and strained relationships among offices were largely the result of these changes. Acknowledging both shifting circumstances and the resulting feelings created strong points of connection among people. Realizing these connections, they remembered their common vision for the organization, and group cohesion began to return.

At the manufacturing plant, managers were able to move on once they listed what was in their control and out of their control. Realizing their connections, both through expressing anxiety and realizing opportunities, enabled them to adjust, learn and carry on.

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Sharpening her saw...

This summer Merryn completed an intensive course in *Change Management* with National Training Laboratories, pioneers in organizational development for 50 years.

A client writes...

"No matter how large the group, each person in the room feels involved in what is going on. She has a calmness about her that invites people to offer their opinions without fear of saying the 'wrong' thing."

John Cameron, Department Chair,
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