

The Deblieux Report

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The Evolution of Change

The Leader's Role in the Process of Moving from Old to New

The word change is an accepted part of our management lexicon. It is what you envision, introduce, and manage as a Workplace Leader.

Change, however, is the wrong word. You do not manage change. You manage evolution. Change conjures up an image of a switch – a flick from old to new. Change can happen that way, but it rarely does. It is more of a process that evolves through a series of actions and reactions.

You create change by leading, managing, and supervising your team as it evolves from a known past into a projected new future. It is a process that requires your full attention to key details.

Respect the Past

Every change evolves from a history of effort and contribution. It is possible because of the work and sacrifice of days gone by. That history is too often ignored or slighted.

Leading a team through the evolution of change requires a special respect for the past. You must:

- Demonstrate that you understand the milestones, roadblocks, and key events that led to the current situation,
- Use words, actions, and behaviors that pay respect to the foundation you now want to change, and,
- Reference the role of the past as it begins to evolve into the future you envision.

Erica applied these principles when she moved into a new job as a Senior Manager. She invested time asking, listening, and learning about the past of her team through the experiences of those who had lived it. She had a facilitator lead a discussion that invited each team member to share their experience with her and their colleagues. She used carefully chosen words to show respect for what had been built prior to her arrival. She frequently referenced what she called, "the solid foundation of our past."

Get Everyone on the Same Train

The seeds of change are often planted by the few rather than the many. The few talk about it among

themselves. They make tentative plans, check with potential vendors, and – this is very important – build momentum toward implementing the new way. They are often steps, if not light-years, ahead of those who will be impacted the most by the change. Without realizing it or intending any harm, they leave the past in the cloak of darkness on the midnight train. As the sun rises in the east, they telegraph back to the team to hurry to the station to board the 9:00 AM Express, destination unknown.

Effective workplace leaders recognize that they attend meetings, participate in discussions, and get exposed to ideas before their team. They recognize that in the process they have an opportunity to ask questions, build their knowledge, and adjust to new ideas and concepts. Importantly, they understand that it is their responsibility to help their team catch-up to them. They understand that their team needs:

- Background information,
- An opportunity to ask questions,
- Help learning new terms, new ways, and new expectations, and,
- Support to leave the past in favor of the future.

Pat applied these principles in the process of changing the core responsibilities of an existing team. Pat began the process with a meeting to talk about the philosophy behind the new job descriptions. Questions were encouraged. Pat invited people to raise their hands, but also provided index cards for writing questions. Buddies were assigned to help each other adjust, adapt, and evolve to the new performance expectations. Those who struggled at first received coaching support – not criticism or discipline. Every effort was made to reinforce success as operations evolved toward the new way of doing things. In the words of one team member, "This never would have worked without the support and understanding we received throughout the change."

Beware the Paradigm

The evolutionary process of change cannot begin if a paradigm blocks the path. A paradigm is an accepted

way of looking at something. It is the current “right way.” More importantly, it is the way that people have worked hard to make work and are invested in keeping in place for a long time to come. Examples abound everywhere:

- The finely tuned Swiss watch with mechanical parts was replaced by the digital watch. The digital watch was invented by the Swiss who saw no future for it because it was without moving parts. Watchmakers in Japan were not constrained by the Swiss paradigm and reinvented the industry.
- Linux, a hugely successful operating system, grew out of collection of software enthusiasts who were not constrained by the paradigm of a corporate headquarters and structured reporting relationships.
- The iPad evolved when Steve Jobs and Apple moved beyond the paradigm of a box, a monitor, a keyboard, and a mouse as a computer.
- The favorite boss who leaves or retires is a paradigm. Most people were safe and secure with their long-time leader. Their replacement threatens everything about the heretofore accepted way of doing things.

A Workplace Leader cannot make a paradigm go away with an e-mail or a speech. Paradigms are ingrained. They go away slowly and reluctantly. You must identify them and understand them. You must recognize and appreciate the threat that challenging them brings to the security of those you are asking to evolve toward the changed world you envision. You must help people see through and beyond their paradigm. Your allies are patience, energy, facts, and early wins for the evolving way of doing things differently; your enemies indifference and irreverence.

It Is All About Relationships

Relationships are often the most important element in the evolution of change. By definition, change changes what people talk about. It changes who they talk to and when they talk to them. It changes the language they use and the expectations they work to achieve.

Relationships are too often taken for granted or forgotten in introducing change. Relationships are not built out of thin air. They require an opportunity for bonding – finding a common ground or interest between the parties. They require a concerted effort to set aside past differences, misperceptions, and stereotypes. They require a Workplace Leader with the skill to bring people together for the common good.

None of this is easy, but if you want people to evolve from their comfortable past to your envisioned future, you must help them create effective workplace relationships – not just with each other, but with you and other leaders as well. How do you do it? You start with:

- Introducing people who do not know each other or who have not worked closely with each other in the past,
- Setting clear expectations about working relationships, and,
- Reinforcing behaviors that create a collaborative relationship between the parties.

In order for “new” to take hold, people must develop, adjust, and adapt in their workplace relationships. It is one of the most often forgotten elements in the evolution of change. You must lead it proactively. It must be one of your highest priorities.

The Language of Evolution

Words provide meaning. They create knowledge. They help people understand and accept. Your words must paint a clear picture of the future you seek to create, not a tarnished image of the past you are leaving behind. People must hear your words and translate them into an accurate portrait of the new landscape they are evolving toward.

You start by explaining the path you expect to follow in positive terms. You repeat that positive message at every opportunity. You succeed when your message creates an atmosphere of possibilities.

The most magical words in evolving toward change are framed in open-ended questions. Lecturing results in listening. It is the bane of evolving toward change. Questions create understanding. They allow followers to grapple with issues, experiment with approaches, and share their vulnerabilities. They encourage engagement and buy-in. You must learn to excel at asking them and listening to the answers.

Conclusion

Change does not just happen. It evolves through a carefully orchestrated process from a valued past. Successful Workplace Leaders manage it carefully. They plan and nurture it as it evolves.

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