

Fear is the Villain in Trying to Accomplish Change; Courage is the Antidote

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The world economy is in upheaval; major institutions (from churches to government and industry) are in crisis; armed conflict, mass destruction and acts of terror are all affecting the way we live our everyday lives.

Responding to all this turmoil creates MORE change. Some of us will become incapacitated and shrink while others will seize the opportunities which change creates --- and triumph.

What makes the difference between our reactions? Between who and which organizations will succeed and which will fail? It is fear -- fear is the villain and its counter-force is courage.

FEAR is a habit, in people as well as in organizations -- an addictive habit. The more it is fed, the larger and stronger it becomes.

There are many fears that inhibit change. They are common in organizations -- whether large or small, sophisticated or basic, business, Not-For-Profit or government. I would like to describe three types today and discuss ways to avoid or overcome them.

1. The misperception/fear that the majority is opposed to an action. Too many leaders want to wait until they think they have a consensus to move forward because they fear a revolt or are afraid that they will be overwhelmingly criticized. The problem is that there is almost always a misperception about the majority.

Picture a "bell curve." Typically, 20 percent of people in any population or group are immediately supportive of positive, beneficial change. They see beyond the obstacles to the benefits immediately and are ready to jump on board.

Another 60% are more cautious and 20% basically dislike change and prefer to stay where they are or go back to the way it was. But, once the 60% understand the change, realize the long term benefits, understand the obstacles and see people they respect supportive of the change, they will support the change plan. When the 20% who dislike change see that they will be left behind, most of them will grudgingly give in and even participate in working on the change. The remaining 5% will never be supportive and will continue working to undermine the change.

The 5% hard-core negative group is always the most vocal. I have seen situations in which the leaders were convinced that a majority was opposed, because the 5% show up, they write lots of letters, they call. The courageous action that leaders must take (once they assure themselves that a beneficial change is necessary) is to move quickly with the 20% vanguard while taking steps to prove that the minority is small and providing substantive information to the cautious 60% majority. Waiting for an approach that will make everyone happy will minimize the potential for success; it will enable the small, vocal minority to gain power.

2. Mistaking "creative tension" for "emotional tension", which is the fear that paralyzes. There is always a gap between vision and reality. Picture two trapezes: the one that we are on is safe and comfortable. The gap between today's reality and tomorrow's vision creates energy that leads people to develop wonderful solutions and strategies for moving forward. That's creative tension. But, the gap can also lead to feelings of anxiety, such as sadness, discouragement and hopelessness.

This emotional state of anxiety can lead us to lowering the vision, which can become a downward spiral leading to mediocrity or failure, as organizations seek "safe" solutions. As Somerset Maugham said, "Only mediocre people are always at their best." Leaders must face the fear in themselves or their organizations, use the gap to generate creative energy for change. Involve others in planning and implementing, communicate activities as much as possible, then MOVE.

3. Fear of troublemakers - Fear that they will jump out at any time and sabotage the effort. The problem with this fear is that the "troublemakers" frequently are a major potential asset, or at a minimum, they are the voice of many others. They typically represent a point of view that needs to be heard or an issue that really needs to be solved. The troublemakers are usually leaders who are not afraid to speak out and to be openly disruptive. They are people who have the self-confidence to say, "The King has no clothes!"

As long as we leave the closet locked, put chairs against it, board it up, there is always the potential that the ghost will get out. But, if we open the closet, let the ghost out and deal with it, who knows? I have seen potentially disastrous problems averted by listening to "troublemakers", involving them (carefully) in teams. Sometimes, once they are listened to and involved, they become strong leaders for the desired change.

What's common to all three of these fears, how do we build courage as a habit, rather than fear? Prepare, communicate and then MOVE.

"He who hesitates is lost." is especially true in times of rapid change. If we don't MOVE forward expeditiously, dissidents will feed on the fear of others; those who are unsure will lose confidence in their leaders, and support will erode in the most convinced of troops.

While Fear is the villain, Courage -- courageous, responsible preparation, communication and then, action -- is the antidote.

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