Inspiring Change

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Change comes with resistance. If we are the top dog of our organization or team, we can force change by dictating it. If that isn't your option or your style, then inspire change by addressing the emotional motivations to change. Logic alone just isn't reason enough.

We human beings, particularly those of us in innovation and product development professional fields, like to think of ourselves as being very adaptable. Our ability to adjust and change is what makes us survive and thrive, in nature as well as business. Yet, we naturally and customarily resist change when it is pressed upon us.

If we are trying to drive change within our organizations and we have the luxury of commanding that the change take place, then we can force our way through that resistance so long as we remain resolute and actively press it forward. However, for those of us in advisory roles or change agent roles, we don't get to dictate to business leaders what they would or should do. We can only influence and propose.

Also, for some leaders, and for some business cultures, dictating and forcing change just isn't what they are about. How then, can we inspire change and convince people to go along when the natural state is to resist? Let's look briefly at two of our most popular change-driving programs in business for some clues.

The Lean methodology and Six Sigma both drive change on a regular basis. Lean drives continuous change, generally, through incremental improvements on a regular basis. The very atmosphere of the Lean environment is about change and the goal or desire of the entire business and all of its personnel is to improve performance from one day to the next.

Similarly, the Six Sigma methodology drives continuous improvement on a regular basis, creating a similar environment of constant change-for-improvement. Six Sigma's tactic to inspire change is to use data to paint objective pictures of the current and potential future states. It separates the emotions and habits from the process and makes decisions objective.

Both systems and methods create and then rely upon an environment of continuous improvement and, therefore, continuous, intentional change. However, those systems don't necessarily help us when it comes to incorporating a newly acquired business into our existing systems and culture, nor do those states form of themselves. If we want to change the way our organizations do things, such as starting a Lean or Six Sigma program for example, we can't simply rely on an environment of continuous improvement to enable it. We must drive the upset.

Changing people's behavior requires disruption, which is of course uncomfortable, and, therefore, it is resisted. How, if we are not going to command it, can we cause people to volunteer to go through the uncomfortable disruption and learn to do things differently? Six Sigma's use of data and logic just isn't enough in the case of major behavioral change.

Here is an example most of us can identify with quickly: diet. We all know that our health can be vastly impacted by our dietary choices and our exercise habits, yet few of us exercise good habits on a regular basis. Even overwhelming data doesn't inspire us to choose differently when the "munchies" strike and the cookie stares us in the face.

Those of us who have made the lifestyle change, typically, didn't do so because the data suggested it. We either watched loved ones suffer or become ill before we found our motivation, or we received our own wake-up call. The decision to change our eating and exercise habits, and the discipline to stick to that decision, is not made because we read and understood the data. It is made because we experienced emotions that motivated us to make the change.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle posited that all human actions have one or more of seven causes: chance, nature, compulsion, habit, reason, passion, and desire. We can argue with Aristotle if we want, and I think that translating emotions from Greek to English is hazardous to begin with. For example, fear is a very good reason for us to take action, and I don't know if Aristotle would include that motivator in the category of compulsion or passion. Aristotle's suggestion none-the-less gives us a very good place to start.

If we can address a multitude of human motivators with our proposals to change, then we stand a better chance of convincing our peers, our leaders, and our personnel, to accept, rather than resist the change. Best of all, if we can get them to desire the change, then it happens all by itself – well almost.

When proposing change, use human motivators against each other to make a case for the change. For example, use reason such as a solid go-forward plan to mitigate fear. In that plan, incorporate elements that will provide uncomfortable feedback

when habits and compulsion result in actions contrary to the new behavior. The plan can be used to counter nature or reason that would compel the audience to suggest or perceive that the change is too difficult or demanding.

Using reason to battle reason or compulsion can counter the arguments against a proposal, it can unravel excuses, but it won't complete the job of convincing someone to change. To do that, leverage your audience's passions, nature, or take advantage of chance.

For example, if friendly competition between project teams or functional groups is part of the nature of your organization's culture, then use that to create a desire for change. Start a competition between teams or groups to see who can manifest the change and the positive results the best or the fastest. If you are the middle manager of an engineering team, for example, and you want to get your team to adopt best practices for the new design software, challenge your peer manager's team to a contest. Goals and rewards can further add to the motivation, inspiring desire. Just remember, the challenge is the result. The change is the means to the end. If you just challenge your team to change, it won't work.

Address your organization's passions. If your organization is passionate about innovation, or the environment, or complains about how difficult things are, then use those passions in your argument to change. Demonstrate how the change is innovative, or will enable better innovation, how it will lessen the business's environmental impact, or suggest that if goals are exceeded then a donation to environmental causes will be made, or show them how it will make difficult things easier.

Look for events that chance may have recently brought to light that will get your audience's attention. Like a loved one that suffers a sudden health event because of poor habit, utilize events to help your audience suddenly feel the urgency to change. It can be events that directly affect your business, or they can be events that affect other respected businesses or competitors.

Finally, talk with your sales people for inspiration. An age-old sales tactic is to make the prospective buyer feel the benefits of the service or product you are selling. When people feel the difference, the decision becomes emotional, not logical, and we readily make the decision to change by buying the offered solution. Chances are, you own an HD TV. I'll bet that the desire to own one didn't come from a data sheet advertizing 1080i pixilation rates. It came when you saw one either at a friend's house or in the store and experienced the difference for the first time.

Find a way, either with a simulation, or by making your executives get their hands dirty, to make your decision-makers experience the difference for themselves. This can often be the very best way to overcome complacency and turn it into urgency.

Even when we are successful in negotiating the decision to make the change, and convince the majority of those who must change behavior of the necessity or importance to do so, it will take a great deal of leadership to get your team or organization through the change. A well-made plan and constant communication

will help prevent your audience from changing their minds when the discomfort of overcoming habits and compulsion kicks in.

One of my favorite quotes concerning change is from the Frenchman, Antoine de Saint Exupery. He said, ”If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.” To me there are two very important words in his quote that help us to inspire change. They are “teach” and “yearn.”

When making your proposal to change, consider that you are teaching your audience to perceive what you perceive. It consists of more than just facts and data; perception includes vision and feeling. Similarly, share with your audience the vision and possibility that you yourself perceive. Transfer your vision and your desire to them. Make them desire the results of the change.

None of this is easy. It takes leadership and negotiation skill, but I find that considering and addressing those human emotions and motivators, as Aristotle defined them or as we define them ourselves, helps plan arguments, proposals, and kickoff speeches with much greater success. I believe that they can help any of us.

As you kick off your next big change, or introduce your next system, don’t rely on reason and data alone to explain the need. Address other human motivators, such as fear, compulsion, habit, passion, and desire. Use passion and desire to battle against habit and compulsion. Use reason to eliminate excuses. Most of all inspire the change by transferring your vision into a desire on the part of your audience to achieve the end.

Stay wise, friends.

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