

Success Strategies

Tips for Leadership and Organizational Transformation

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Evidence-Based Approach in Coaching

Too often we act upon, or react to untested assumptions. We may spend time and energy exploring or taking a course of action without first stopping to determine if we have all of the requisite data. In coaching others (and self-coaching) frequently ask whether conclusions are being drawn prematurely and whether additional data are needed.

Good coaching involves constantly asking ourselves and others to define the basis for our assumptions and beliefs. For example, do we really have data to confirm that previous actions were successful? What data validates our conclusions about how others feel about us? What evidence indicates that we have valid reasons to feel secure or insecure? On what evidence do we base the conclusions we draw about others?

In other words, what is really true and what evidence do we have to know that what we believe is true is actually so?

The Story Fosters Change

Leaders need to explain the threats to their organization by telling a compelling, optimistic, and succinct *Story*—which is a strategy for conquering the threats. This is critical to managing and fostering essential change. If the threats are not recognized, then leaders are not paying attention (because threats are always present). If *The Story* is not crisply framed, then the leaders may not truly know *The Story*—which would mean that the organization is even more deeply vulnerable to threats.

The Story helps people focus in order to push ahead, even though the needed change may appear overwhelming. *The Story* also gives people certainty in times of tremendous change by obviating the tendency to deny that change will actually occur. The voice for *The Story* may start with the top leader, such as the CEO, but in order for it to have sufficient impact, it must cascade outward to a critical mass of leaders who understand, embrace, and convey it throughout the organization.

A Culture that Encourages the Disclosure of “Bad News”

“Don’t bring me ... bad news” – so goes the song by the Wicked Witch in the Broadway production of *The Wiz*. This chant is also implicitly belted within many organizations. Leaders often unconsciously create cultures that convey the message, “We don’t want to hear about issues, concerns, or problems with key initiatives”—even though their rational selves understand that they must hear these things in order to avert nasty surprises or even ultimate failure.

The better strategy is to create a culture where “bad news” is “good news.” That is, a culture in which it is good to bring problems to light and where the messenger is not blamed. This is especially important during times of change, because change generates problems in need of solutions. It is always best to bring issues to the surface so they can be addressed before they grow or mutate into worse situations. Ways to encourage the confident disclosure of “bad news” include:

- Repeatedly communicate that it is everyone’s responsibility to toss out a red flag when something is not going as intended.
- Encourage a group process where healthy conflict is the norm and where “to get along, go along” is shunned. Healthy conflict occurs when disagreements are put squarely on the table, without personal attacks, as opposed to being aired behind people’s backs. Healthy conflict is supported when the group engages in an objective exploration of the underlying facts. (Refer to Fall 2003 Newsletter for more on Conflict at: www.wbwassociates.com)
- Acknowledge that mistakes will be made. In fact, mistakes are to be expected when organizations engage in continuous change such as rolling out new products, processes, systems, or other initiatives.

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A Culture that Encourages the Disclosure of “Bad News”, con’t.

- Give people a voice. Provide a way for everyone involved to be heard during meetings rather than allowing groupthink to dominate. Ask, “Where are we having problems with what we are trying to achieve?” Also provide ways for people to surface issues anonymously.
- Celebrate individuals who report problems via public praise, thank you notes, and other methods. Reward individuals who helpfully identify problems, and challenge those who do not.
- Avoid making it personal. When a problem surfaces, address it objectively with expectations, standards, a system, or communication rather than identifying it as a problem with a person.
- Do something about the problem. Demonstrate that when people raise issues, those issues will always be addressed rather than swept under the rug.
- Make the solution count. Apply the knowledge gained by fixing the problem to improvements that will have a positive impact system-wide.

The Ups and Downs of Organizational Stress

A certain amount of organizational stress is essential for stimulating creativity and action. Too much stress, however, has the opposite effect. What are the factors that increase and decrease organizational stress?

Factor that Increase Organizational Stress

- Speed of change
- Volume and newness of task demands
- New roles
- Role ambiguity
- Role conflict
- Lack of job fulfillment
- New and unfamiliar technology
- Uncaring treatment
- Lack of collegiality
- Perception of insufficient or inequitable rewards
- Lack of recognition for achievements
- Lack of opportunity to have concerns heard
- Sense of loss of control and involvement
- Poor relationship with boss

Factors that Decrease Organizational Stress

- Instilling an understanding of the need for the pace of change
- Prioritizing
- Clarifying roles, redesigning tasks, acknowledging ambiguity
- Clarifying expectations and goals
- Ensuring the right people are in the right jobs, able to do meaningful and valued work
- Development of skills
- Training
- Treating people with respect and compassion
- Maintaining a sense of esprit de corps
- Developing positive relationships with peers and others
- Paying fairly and explaining rationale
- Giving credit where credit is due
- Genuine listening to concerns
- Involving people, engaging them in dialogue and debate, creating solutions to problems and pathways to opportunities
- Giving people access to the information they need to be effective
- Understanding any need for additional financial or staff resources
- Providing opportunities for people to take a break simply to have fun
- Recognizing and reaffirming short and long-term career interests
- Providing opportunities for people to express their frustrations
- Develop leaders who show interest in and develop others, build relationships of mutual respect, create a positive environment while maintaining high standards