

Change: Misconceptions

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Popular knowledge has us believe that people struggle to accept and adjust to change, and for the primary reaction to any change within our comfort zone to be one of resistance. However, more often than not, resistance would appear to be the result of ineffective communication.

Very few would argue that if we did not have the ability to change, we would have been extinct a rather long time ago. We might not always embrace and enjoy change, but there is ample proof given in history for our ability to adjust and adapt to just about any circumstances.

Driven by habits

We appear to be strongly driven by habits. Participants in a seminar will take their place wherever I put their name card, or chose a seat and place their own name card there. The seat is immediately marked or conceived as personal territory. If I change the name cards around the next morning, participants react with irritation. So, do they resist change? Hardly. It is just that habits form very quickly and a change without explanation leads to understandable irritation.



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The CEO of a company that I give seminars for made that point by calling for a meeting but removing all the chairs before the participants arrived. As you would expect, people reacted surprised if not irritated to the unfamiliar situation. In this case, it served the purpose of letting people know that things were no longer as before. It was a great way to get people's mind in tune for change.

Understanding resistance

We tend to adapt and change very subtly. It is interesting to see how often top managers in a company are mimicked by their staff. It shows in the behavior, writing styles, clothes or even just

gestures. Even the values follow the example set by the executive. However, what is wonderful and considered an asset today will easily become a burden, seen as a detriment when other executives get in charge, or companies are sold, merge etc. Do people resist? No, but just as you hardly shift into reverse while driving full speed forward, people have to have a chance to stop, understand and modify their course or start again.

Unfortunately, we have gone through phases where anyone above 35-40 was suspect, to say the least, of being of yesteryear, unable to deal with rapidly developing environments. Yet, I have seen many 30 year olds with minds that rather near retirement, and numerous 55 year olds with dynamic young minds, but the added benefit of experience. Why do we fall so quickly for trendy management styles? Age and experience is as little an obstacle as youth is a guarantee for success. It is certainly not a measure of our ability to deal with change.

Change as opportunity

Not every change is a change. There are many subtle differences. Just as there are many differences in the motivation to initiate change. Sometimes companies restructure their company, not because they actually have an organizational problem, but rather due to managerial issues. We can hardly blame staff for not embracing such changes. Indeed, not to change when appropriate or necessary could lead to extinction. However, we first need to identify what is wrong or what has actually changed. Did the market environment change, or are there simply new bosses who want to mark their territory? Change will often lead to uncertainty and a loss of productivity. This will inevitably happen unless proper reasons are given.

It's important to emphasize the opportunity in change, not the threat. While I readily admit that a police car in the rear view mirror is great at calming traffic, reminding those nearby to mind their driving and speed, fear is actually not a good motivator for a company. In fact, it is demotivating.

Change has to follow market needs, environments, financial considerations and other circumstances, but not personal egos. May you always have the wisdom to see the difference between the two.

What people want

Fact is, people want to work for successful companies. People are perfectly willing to do their part. However, instead of huge change management exercises and the deployment of consultants, talk to the people. Keep it simple and

straightforward. It is, actually, very much a matter of leadership.

Don't fear change, illustrate it as that CEO did, but always ensure that people know what and why you do something. The "what" becomes infinitely more bearable if the rationale is really known and understood. All too often, we tend to add complexity when all we ought to do is identify, clarify, verify and simplify. Then act quickly and with determination.

Let there always be change for the good and for the right reasons to the benefit of all.

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