

# Transformers

Changing your corporate culture may take time, but it's worth it

**C**an people really change? That's a question I hear at least several times a month. In response, I recount stories of clients who have made remarkable changes, sometimes in the first couple of months of our relationship, sometimes after seeming to be coasting for a year then exploding into the changes they need to make in order for their goals to become a reality.

"I'm in the change business," I say, so of course I believe people really do change. I've been a part of changes in organizations, which come down to lots of individuals changing for the greater good of the system. So, I know it can happen.

Sometimes cultural change can strangle an organization. If the people are closing up and are moving from a trusting and open environment to one filled with anxiety and paranoia, it can happen. It can happen with a change in leadership if the new people in charge are spreading the perception that, "things are gonna be different around here from now on, and if you don't like it, there's the door."

Culture shifts that enliven an organization, of course, are just the opposite. Respect, integrity and appreciation flow in relationships, internally and externally. Fear gradually melts away and people are more fully themselves at work, which means much more creative energy and brilliance is released.

Communication is open and trust grows. It might take several years for this kind of transformation, but it is worth every minute.

Alan Deutschman's article in *Fast Company*, quoted above, makes a case for how difficult it is for us to change our thinking and behavior, and how essential it is that we do just that to keep our organizations and our lives vital and growing.

Sometimes, change is the hardest for the person at the top who may have become

rigid with success and not able to meet the demands of an environment moving from a command-and-control model to a more transparent and collaborative culture.

Organizational research shouts at us that the latter model leads to higher productivity – read "profitability." Everyone has more fun at work as well.

So why do we stay entrenched in a failing framework?

Change is incredibly difficult for people, even when it's a matter of life and death. Many studies reveal that after coronary artery bypass surgery, a high percentage of those patients have not made the lifestyle changes necessary to fight heart disease, before it kills them. These people are aware of all the reasons they should change their behavior, and yet they still don't. Factual information doesn't seem to overcome our resistance to change and our tendency to backslide.

Most of us want to know the facts. But facts alone don't seem to cut it. If they did, I guess no one would smoke and everyone would wear seat belts.

It takes more than information to get us to think and behave differently. Our emotions and deeper selves must be stirred. We must be inspired. That is what is required of leaders who want to change the behavior of people inside their organizations or inside their target market.

They must inspire change by voicing a consistent message, a vision that is clearly articulated and painted on the wall of each mind, including the picture of how life will be enhanced for everyone. They must inspire others with their own excitement and conviction so that people want to jump on the train and go chugging toward a transformed organization, even if they encounter some dusty days and a derailment or two along the way. And they will. Change is often messy.

People are more likely to change if they

have lots of support within the environment. Think of the AA model. A supportive environment provides training that we need in order to think and behave differently. Communication is open and plentiful. People speak their truth. Encouragement abounds.

Rewards are built into the change model early on, so that there is payback for the hard work of change. There is lightness and fun in the mix. One conversation at a time, the train picks up steam.

One irony about resisting change is that we are all constantly changing whether we like it or not. We become quite aware of biological changes as we get older. New ideas or notions do enter our minds and sometimes gather enough of an emotional or psychological charge to stimulate a change in our behavior. You hear talk of how a movie or a book, or even a song just grabbed someone and catapulted him or her into change, sometimes an extreme make-over.

A crisis can propel a family, or a business, into change.

Organizational cultures will change, too, over time, no matter what. I think, though, with all the available behavioral science and the management know-how at hand, we can design the transformation we want in an organization rather than have it happen pell-mell.

Similarly, we each can have a lot to do with the design of our own individual growth and vitality. I certainly want to bring my own intention to the blueprints for my business and my life. And, I know that there will still be plenty of surprises to keep me awake.



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