

Changing the Way We Change

Removing the resistive forces to change by reducing learning anxiety is the key to unlocking the discretionary effort of your people to maintain the viability and vibrancy of your business. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**



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What would happen to your organization if all of its people suddenly vanished?

What would remain is nothing but an impotent agglomeration of assets that sit idly by awaiting an infusion of human inspiration. People are the life-force of every organization. Human capital is the asset that turns inspiration into action. The structures, processes, practices, and technologies firms invest in are virtually useless without people.

How ironic it is that our current accounting practices call things such as property and equipment “assets” and people “liabilities.” People are the most critical asset organizations have today. People matter to an organization’s survival more than ever, and organizations that do not recognize the primacy of people are destined to go the way of the dinosaur.

People have the power to make organizations succeed or fail. It is through the ingenuity and energy of people that organizations identify new growth horizons and uncover fertile ground to seed new opportunities. It is also through the intractability and apathy of people that organizations develop toxic work environments and crippling orthodoxies that grind the operation to a screeching halt.

In short, it is people—not things—who determine the ultimate fate of any organization because organizations cannot change unless their people change.

SURVIVAL ANXIETY VS. LEARNING ANXIETY

Kurt Lewin’s work framed change as a state of equilibrium brought about by a series of driving and restraining change forces. Many organizational efforts to effect change have been informed by this “Force Field” model, and much of the emphasis has been placed on understanding how to drive change.

Leaders seeking to drive organization change typically have leveraged position, reward, and coercive power to mandate changed behavior from the people below them. According to Ed Schein, this approach to change increases the level of “*Survival Anxiety*” within the employee base to a point where it overcomes their “*Learning Anxiety*” to unlearn what they already know in order to learn something

new. The challenge with this approach is that it requires more and more driving forces to be applied, creating more survival anxiety within the system.

Daniel Kahneman suggests that a more impactful way to achieve organizational change is not to focus on adding driving forces, but instead to focus on removing the resistive ones. In doing so, the overall tension in the system decreases and change can be achieved far more efficiently and effectively.

In Schein’s terms, this would imply that instead of increasing survival anxiety by manipulating behavior through fear and shared desperation, organizations would be better served by decreasing learning anxiety by creating a safer environment that motivates change toward a shared aspiration.

SHARED ASPIRATIONS

Leaders who adopt this change approach begin by demonstrating the desired changed behavior rather than demanding it from others. They focus on the intrinsic motivational levers that compel people to contribute discretionary effort by tapping into their aspirations and giving them autonomy in return for accountability. They create meaning for their people in a way that clearly connects their individual aspirations to the collective aspirations of the enterprise.

Profitable growth is the reward an organization receives for consistently delighting its stakeholders: customers, partners, suppliers, shareholders, and the communities within which it operates. If your employees are intrinsically motivated to contribute their discretionary effort around a shared aspiration and they are given the autonomy and accountability to achieve that aspiration, they will work tirelessly to delight stakeholders, and your organization will thrive. If that doesn’t happen, it will become increasingly challenging for your organization to survive.

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Do you have what it takes to change the way you change in your organization? **T**