

Bob Gunn, Editor

Why Ships Are Built

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

▶ Taking Oscar to pre-school used to be an ordeal. He'd grip the seatbelt buckle until his mother Pamela pulled him from the car seat, then drag his feet to the classroom door. And when Pamela turned to leave, he'd

cling to her leg, wailing, "No, Mama, no!"

The kicker: The whole scene was replayed five hours later when Pamela came to pick him up. By then Oscar was involved in activities and engaged with other kids. Reluctantly, he'd take Pamela's hand, hanging back at the school gate and insisting, "I don't want to go home!"

The teachers put a name to Oscar's pattern: He, like a lot of kids, has trouble with transitions. It shows up commonly at back-to-school time, "often the result of concerns about change, fitting in, or...competency," explained psychologist Bela Chopp in an August 2005 article in *FamilyWorks Magazine* (Shannon M. Dean, "Ease Your Kids Into a New School Year").

Unlike many other childhood issues, transition anxiety seems to be something we don't grow out of. It was palpable, for example, at a recent kick-off meeting for a client's



staff transformation effort. Intellectually, the core project team accepted that they were about to completely change the service delivery model so that almost everything would be different. The business case was compelling. In the quiet conversations during the breaks, you could overhear them saying that it was 100% obvious that the services needed to be overhauled to be more relevant to the businesses. As a matter of fact, a few of them had been vocal in the

past about instituting a "revolution," which is why they'd been selected to design and implement the future.

But talking intellectually about change is one thing. Walking into that conference room made it *real*. The team leader and facilitators could see the fear, uncertainty, and doubt (FUD) flit across the participants' faces. And they heard it in gallows humor and nervous laughter. "Oh my gosh!" "No turning back." "Welcome to the Twilight Zone."

We have very little trouble listing the things we don't like about our current work situation. When we spend a day or two offsite envisioning an ideal future state, we come away inspired by possibilities. But in the process to get from where we are to where we dream, we experience varying degrees of discomfort.

Change means leaving the familiar, the safe. What "works for you" may not even be part of the job description when your department is reorganized. Your routine will surely be disrupted. New coworkers will take the offices next to your space. New programs may have to be learned. Untried policies followed. The promised state seems so far away. Wouldn't it be grand if we

could tap a button like Captain Kirk and simply be beamed up?

Actually, no. There's something about stepping into the challenge, becoming more comfortable feeling *uncomfortable*, allowing yourself to be fully present with chaos. If we never try anything hard, we never find out what we are made of, how strong we are, what resources we can find, or how *big* we can become.

There are things we can do to hold people steady as they move through transitions. For example, we can adapt the advice *FamilyWorks* gave parents:

- **Offer soothing routines.** "No matter how much we protest that we like variety, kids are actually comforted by routines....Experts suggest beginning to integrate the back-to-school routine at least two weeks before the first day of school." The organization may not be ready to roll out the entire new model, but it should begin to integrate even small portions of it as early as possible.

- **Face fret about fitting in.** "Kids are usually horribly afraid of appearing confused or out of place....A parent's primary back-to-school task is to gather enough information to give your child an accurate idea of what to expect." This includes helping the child identify a "buddy" to turn to when they need help or support. The organization's transition leader must make communication her top priority, telling as much as possible of what she knows and, even more important, what is still unknown and the questions that are being asked.

- **Expect stress about performance.** "Students may worry that they'll struggle to handle this year's academic requirements." Old schoolwork or report cards can remind the child of his ability to rise to challenges in the past. Supervisors can't promise employees that their com-

petencies will match new job specs. But leaders can point to each person's innate resources—intelligence, common sense, creativity—for reassurance regarding ability to deal *with whatever comes*.

Whatever the tactic, the key to navigating transition is a *mind-set*: Keep your thinking in the present! Imagination fuels anxiety; it can't get a grip when your thoughts are 100% grounded in the now.

Of course, thoughts about the future will intrude. It's the subtext of every conversation about transformational change. The leader faces the same uncertainties as her team. In the group we met earlier, the leader said at the outset, "I am not certain that I will have a job at the end of this process." But she understood that just because her thoughts looked ahead, she didn't have to dwell on them. She could mentally turn her back when worry and doubt intruded on the present and threatened to overwhelm her brain as if she were sticking her head inside a rock band's drum. She knew that even a simple act—stopping and taking a breath—can be all it takes to refocus mental energy on the now.

She had entered the stream of transition. It didn't matter if she didn't know where the river was flowing. She understood that her job was simply to guide others to the far side.

Mental awareness, presence, is her rudder on this journey. If change is like the river, then beliefs and assumptions are like the boulders under the surface of the rapids. They remain unseen and are revealed only because they force the water to tumble and roil, creating humongous waves and wicked whirlpools.

Subconscious beliefs are one reason that change is so hard. Nothing can stop the current of change. The

life force expresses itself fresh, spontaneously in all moments. But we are too easily bumped and bruised when we don't see our mental boulders midstream. Our mental energy plummets and plunges accordingly.

How do we avoid that? By reading our emotions the same way a guide reads the river's surface. Upset, worry, and FUD are signs of a hidden belief system or mind-set. As soon as we become aware of what's hidden, we have more choices in our reactions and actions. Not that we actually have to "do" anything about it necessarily: Sensing a ripple in the fabric of our consciousness often is enough. That allows us to wait with an open mind, tuned fully into the present moment. An insight emerges. It points away from the old mental habit, allowing us to make a choice to go right or left, upriver or downriver, this side or that.

The job in transition is like that of the river guide watching for boulders: Spot assumptions sooner, and check them out. Are they solid, requiring strategies to deal with them, or easily ignored and left behind?

Just as organizational changes hark back to childhood transitions, so do they look forward to nothing less than the whole of life. Put simply: All life is change. Setting a goal of "always smooth sailing" is not only unrealistic, it is also far less fulfilling than staying fresh, flexible, aware. Present. Always moving, seeking the far shore of possibility. ■

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