

Bob Gunn, Editor

Paved with Good Intentions

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

The muttering began at the first break in the meeting. “Doesn’t the boss know what we’re going through?” The group had been culled from throughout the corporation to map out the first steps of a change initiative.

Their faith in the leader was shaken, but not because he had chastised them or delivered doom-and-gloom projections. In fact, he’d done the opposite: waxed eloquent about the bright future, affirmed his “can-do” belief in the team. To which the group responded, in essence, “That’s easy for him to say....”

This experience is an all-too-common result of good intentions. This boss is a caring, tuned-in leader. He continually asks for feedback and is genuinely interested in how people are reacting as the corporate transformation gains momentum. His concern for the staff’s level of anxiety is heartfelt. But his assumption of the role of “chief cheerleader”

can undermine his credibility, ultimately doing more harm than good.

The well-intentioned impulse to improve morale by spreading positive affirmations is always doomed. The combination of insecurity and imagination can generate an infinite amount of doubt and speculation,

and the resources to put out those morale fires are limited. That’s the bad news.

Now for the good news: You don’t have to maintain a mask of good cheer to successfully lead change. Your job isn’t to make people comfortable—it’s to encourage them to get comfortable with *discomfort*. The way to do that is by being real: demonstrably clear-headed about the challenges of change. *Ground* your optimism;

show that you’re confident because you know where to find the resources to handle whatever comes down the pike. Those resources include expertise *plus* insight and creativity. They are close at hand—not only from the leader or from outside experts but within the collective intelligence of the team.

“Change is hard,” one manager sums up. “It’s not always a pep talk that I want. Sometimes, ‘Yeah, this is tough stuff’ can be more energizing. I need to know that the leaders understand what I’m feeling.” The communication she’s asking for requires careful calibration: creating and holding a space in which people can talk about what’s going on without indulging in whine-fests.

The leader achieves that by paying attention to the fine points of tone. Don’t wait until conversation has spiraled out of control, until people are shouting in anger or rolling their eyes in frustration. Watch for the first signs of a downward spiral, the mind games that any number can play but which nobody wins, such as:

- **Singing the same old song.**

The first time an observation or question surfaces, it invites new perspectives. By the third or fourth



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iteration, however, it grinds down creativity.

● **“Yes, but.”** Person A presents a problem; Person B offers a possible solution. “Yes, that’s a great idea,” comes the response, “but it won’t work because. . . .” The first or second objection could be a genuine effort to check out all the angles. By the third, however, frustration begins to mount.

● **“If only.”** Here’s a game that can be played by one: Focus on all the “if only” circumstances that make it impossible to implement the possible. (“Yes, but” and “If only” are adapted from the work of Transactional Analysis proponent Eric Berne.)

All such games sabotage the change process. Nobody sets out to start them; they stem from unconscious patterns of thinking, of thought habits. An astute leader, however, sees the telltale signs early on.

All three of the games just described have a common element: *repetition*. Our thinking is meant to flow; no idea, however great, is as powerful as the natural force that continuously generates thoughts. Whatever situation we face, our minds are capable of working on it—consciously and subconsciously—and delivering fresh insights, unexpected perspectives, and creative solutions. We work against ourselves when we block that natural flow of thought—grinding away by singing the same old song, by playing “yes, but” or “if only.”

Avoid this by creating a “parking lot” at the start of each meeting. When it becomes apparent that an issue can’t be resolved right now—perhaps it’s beyond the group’s authority, too many factors are yet unknown, or people simply aren’t ready—“park it” on a large sheet of paper. Respect the concern, but ask the group to put it on the back

burner. Move to a subject that generates more free-flowing conversation; return later to the sticky issue, taking it around the track again until you hit another bog. This “lap process” allows decision making to be more organic and less stressful.

A broader perspective on supporting transitions can be found in the work of Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen. For more than 40 years, she has worked with people facing the ultimate change—dying patients and the doctors who care for them. Recently we were struck by parallels in Dr. Remen’s work, discussed in an article in the September 2005 *Attaché*, and corporate change initiatives.

“It’s part of the maturation of the human being to be capable of standing with others in hard times,” Dr. Remen said. The article goes on to list Dr. Remen’s advice to caregivers. Her ideas can also be adapted to those leading change in corporations:

(1) “Listen generously.” When people describe what’s making them anxious, our first impulse may be to try to fix it. But everyone has access to the resources we described earlier—common sense, insight, creativity. When we listen from such confidence, it’s easier for them to be calm—and open to their own fresh thinking.

(2) “Be open to possibility.” As Dr. Remen insists, “Growth doesn’t start with a large thing; it starts with a little bitty edge. Watch for the edge.” Then focus to take on the hardest challenge one step at a time, as with everything else in life.

(3) “Ask the real questions.” Don’t get bogged down in details. Continually point people toward context, toward meaning, toward what they really care about and what really matters—not just to the

organization but to them.

(4) “Be willing to see the familiar in new ways.” The surer someone is that there’s only one way to look at something, the more they are stuck in a thought loop operating from a stale set of assumptions.

(5) “Have respect for the unconscious mind.” Too often, groups keep grinding away at a problem from the well-intended drive to come to resolution via analysis. But as we’ve seen, reliance on the unconscious—the back burner—eases the process by giving us a flash of inspiration, common sense when we most need it.

(6) “Don’t be afraid of silence.” So much to do, so little time. The impulse is to go-go-go toward the goal. Build time for reflection into the change process. That investment will pay dividends in clarity, focus, and fresh approaches to get more done with less effort.

(7) “Use everything.” The path to transformation surely will have bumps along the way. What we learn from mistakes, the strength we develop in handling tough stuff, adds to our resources.

“We are going to make mistakes,” another change leader recently told her team. She spoke quietly, thoughtfully, but nonetheless powerfully. “And we’re going to have to be forgiving—of each other and of ourselves.”

Sounds a lot different from cheerleading, doesn’t it? But it is certainly a lot more sustainable in a world where change is our only constant. ■

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