

# Wisdom at the Edge

Resistance is a part of every change initiative. Leaders need to keep attuned to the situation so they can recognize whether the resistance being encountered is merely a normal part of change or an alarm signaling much worse. Successful leaders listen using their wisdom of the head, heart, and body.

**W**ith average annual snowfall of 32 inches and temperatures recorded as low as  $-32^{\circ}\text{F}$ , Omaha, Neb., isn't a place where you can play beach volleyball in the winter. So my high school acquired two old tires and filled the center of each with cement to support a metal pole. These were placed on either side of the gymnasium, and a net was strung between. After gym class, we ninth-grade girls were charged with stowing the equipment. One February afternoon, Kathy and I were rolling away the last of the tires. "Have you got it?" Kathy asked. "Yes," I said. She let go; I couldn't hold on; the tire came crashing down. And broke my toe.

Obviously, I was clueless about my physical limits, which is why, decades later, I started taking yoga classes—not so that I could twist like a pretzel, but so that I would be more in touch with what some

call "body wisdom." I've been making headway within a frame offered by my yoga teacher: "Your 'edge' is the place where change can happen."

Of course, if we never challenge our muscles, we'll never get stronger or more flexible. At the same time, however, if we push willy-nilly past our edge, our muscles will cramp, and our whole bodies will tighten up protectively. Rather than make progress, we may injure ourselves as I did so long ago with that cement-filled tire.

Helpful perspective on this comes from Lee Gregory, a partner at Accompli, a change leadership consultancy. Just back from baseball fantasy camp, Lee says: "You have to try something different to get different results. Your natural golf or baseball swing is what's comfortable to you. If you want to re-groove it, you have to put in something *uncomfortable*. You need to stay with it long enough to see results and then assimilate it as your new, authentic swing. That requires giving yourself permission to be okay if your results are not stellar when you first try it."

I offer these sports analogies to enhance perspective of what hap-

pens in change initiatives. We all know that a certain amount of resistance is inevitable (it isn't called "the comfort zone" for nothing). In other words, people stay well back from the edge—and change doesn't happen.

When a team is indulging its comfort zone, carrot-and-stick tactics may work. But when people are truly being pushed too far, too fast, a different strategy is required. I'm reminded of the CFO who became angry with his team when a change initiative seemed to be floundering. "They all know what needs to be done," he fumed. "Why is this taking so long?" When he calmed down, he realized that some bases hadn't been covered. Without key conversations and initiatives shoring up fundamentals, the team was beyond garden-variety discomfort and into panic, which cuts off access to the thinking resources essential to make change happen. As Bob Gunn, my coauthor and the originator of this column, often said: "Sometimes you have to start slow to finish fast."

To hold a steady course into the unknown, a leader must be able to diagnose what's wrong—distinguish between sob stories and genuine concerns, between



## BEST PRACTICES

the kind of adversity that will eventually build an organization's muscles and a leap whose benefits won't outweigh its negatives. Are people whining because that's what they do, or are they really being asked to do too much or go too fast? Is their resistance an ordinary obstacle to push past? Or is it a screaming alarm that the organization is over the edge?

In short, the leader must develop a good listening ear. The first step is to open up to feedback. We all know many leaders who say they want to hear what's going on

**“Treating ourselves like appliances that can be unplugged and plugged in again at will or cars that stop and start with the twist of a key, we have forgotten the importance of fallow time and winter and rests in music.”**

—William Bridges, *Transitions*

in their organizations—and a much smaller number who actually mean it. Too often, the leader doesn't really want to hear what she considers to be bad news.

“If you shut the door, of course nothing bad can come in,” observes Lee. “But nothing beneficial can come through, either. It's like saying that you'll pan for gold only if you're guaranteed that you'll get nothing but nuggets. Leaders should be willing and able to sift through all sorts of raw information and find the nuggets.”

In addition to sifting data via the intellect, the head, we also need to engage the wisdom of the body and of the heart (sometimes called emotional intelligence). For example: Lee remembers a time

early in his career when he was asked to give feedback on a boss from hell. “The first part of the conversation was benign,” Lee recalls. “But as it went further, I got in touch with my pain. My voice began to thicken. I was surprised and, frankly, mortified by my own emotion.”

Unlike me, Lee is well in tune with his “body wisdom.” Indeed, the body became his path to emotional intelligence: When he noticed that he was choking up, he realized that his heart was being touched. His physical and emo-

tional discomfort spurred a breakthrough in awareness.

So don't just sit at your desk reading reports (*wisdom of the head*). Set aside your agenda, assumptions, and expectations, and walk the halls with curiosity. Get a sense of the tone (*wisdom of the heart*). Are the corridors hushed, or are voices sharp? Is there easy laughter? Pay attention to signs of physical well-being (*wisdom of the body*). Is absenteeism high, are people hunched at their desks or fidgeting through meetings, or is there an easy confidence to their walk?

Carl is fortunate to work for a leader who's listening with all three forms of wisdom. A high performer at a leading technology

company, Carl was promoted last year and put in charge of a team developing a major new product. But instead of being gratified at the confidence placed in him, Carl has been riddled with angst: “What if I can't get my team to deliver?” With a new baby, an underwater mortgage, and slippage in the project's timeline, Carl hyperventilated when his boss recently called him in.

“I've been analyzing your progress reports,” the boss said. “I understand the problems and challenges. I have great confidence, but I'm concerned about you. I hear an increasing terseness in your memos and conversations. And it looks like you haven't been sleeping. Let's talk about what *you* need.”

The boss's tone wasn't critical, condescending, or cloy—it was authentically open. Thus, he elicited from Carl an equally authentic response—no defensiveness, no bravado, no self-pity. One outcome: Carl took a “mental health day”—his first in 18 months—and came back with renewed energy and fresh perspective. Thanks to his boss's multidimensional listening, Carl found the resources, external and internal, to support him in the unknown. He's still working hard, but more organically.

He's now playing at the edge where change can indeed happen. **SF**

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