

EXPLORERS OF TRANSITION - ORGANISATIONS

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My particular area of interest is organisational dynamics - looking at how organisations adapt to change.

Organisations (¹) are living entities that are born, need to be nurtured, grow up, get old and eventually die. "Bios" can provide a model and perspective for analysing what goes on in organisations. One of the advantages of being scheduled for late in the day is that you can incorporate into your presentation, material presented earlier. I'm sure all of us can think of organisations which would fall into the predator (prey) category, the competitive exclusion category and the symbiotic category as they were described this morning - we can probably even think of some hybrids.

We can also look to nature for the cycles that an organisation can expect to encounter. The progression consists of five parts: death, decay, gestation, germination and rebirth. These have been presented in a very specific order. Coming from a feminine perspective and believing in the continuum, I do not see death as necessarily meaning extinction. From my perspective, death can also mean the letting go of old perspectives and outmoded ways of functioning and this can lead to a regeneration and a rebirth.

Presently, all organisations and institutions are buffeted by many forces for change. We are moving out of the industrial age into a new era. Given the pace of new developments, the process of adjustment is a continual one. While some organisations see this as a time of unrivalled opportunity to put in place a new integrated vision, for most organisations it is a time of painful adaptation.

In recent years, considerable research has been undertaken to determine why some organisations are more capable of adapting to the times than others. Areas examined include leadership capabilities and qualities, an organisation vision and goals, systems and procedures, etc. Many valuable insights can be gained from reading the recently published literature. It is existing to think that new developments in biotechnology may provide us with new models with which we can examine organisational activity.

For purposes of my brief presentation, I would like to categorise individuals in an organisation as being either change agents or status quo seekers. Change agents could very generally be described as those who feel the need to take action to adapt and status quo seekers as those who resist change. If I can make one observation, the larger the organisation the higher the percentage of status quo seekers one is likely to find.

Marilyn Ferguson, in her book "The Aquarian Conspiracy" noted that most people, when faced with a choice of change of the status quo will choose the status quo. What is it that drives this choice?

In large part it is fear of the unknown, or fear of losing power, losing status, control and possessions. These things tend to keep status quo seekers in a pattern of holding on to old attitudes and outmoded habits. The process of letting go is frightening. Status quo seekers often feel they are being asked to jump into a void empty-handed.

As was mentioned this morning, fear is not unhealthy. What is signified is that the choice confronting the individual is one which will affect his or her deepest roots. Greater understanding of this experience at the level of the individual should influence the way in which organisations develop and implement change programs.

Yet, how many reorganisation horror stories have you heard lately - where employees arrive one morning to find an announcement, new organisation charts, new directives, new systems and procedures. This approach is like taking a fish from the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea, plunging into an icy cold stream in the Canadian Rocky Mountains and telling it to swim.

In a re-organisation, let us say that will take x amount of energy to bring about a certain change. The task would be much easier if the collective was comprised of explorers of transition instead of status quo seekers. If you could reduce the energy spent on trying to maintain the status quo - by even a small amount - you would free valuable energy in the organisation which could be used for other purposes.

What can be done to help the status quo seekers take those first steps towards being an explorer of transition? In looking at this question, it is important to remember that matters of trust and confidence are at issue here.

Firstly, we can start by giving greater recognition to the uniqueness of each individual and by relating to them as whole persons. Organisations

are made up of individuals, each with different skills and abilities, different backgrounds, and different hopes and fears. Employees, volunteers, and even your boss - they all need to know that they are valuable and important human beings. When relating to co-workers, try coming "straight from the heart as a currently popular song suggests.

Secondly, and following on from the first initiative, we can nurture an environment in which each person believes, that what they think and what they do, makes a difference. Who knows - the most creative suggestion may come from the person who opens the mail.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, we can encourage more open discussion about our concerns and our fears. Once identified, these are more easily addressed. The goal is to replace fear with hope and a discussion about our hopes and dreams for the kind of environment we wish to live in, can help to move the collective in that direction.

A song comes to mind which captures the essence of the points I have just presented. It is called "Just One Voice" by singer/songwriter Ann Mortifee. Ann was born in South Africa, lives in Canada and has produced some very inspiring music. I'd like to draw your attention to one verse of this song in particular.

A single drop becomes the rain
A single step becomes a journey
A single heart that tries again
Can change the course of history's turning.

Taking these initiatives will not guarantee successful implementation of a change program. Consider them as part of laying the groundwork. I believe they can pave the way for a transformation of attitudes in the status quo seeker.

To look at the process another way, this first stage is also a deprogramming exercise. In my office I have a sign which reads "DEPROGRAM THE BRAIN OF LIMITING ORTHODOX CONCEPTS". It serves three purposes: it reminds me that I am a product of my conditioning, it prompts me to ask myself - is this an outmoded response - and it sometimes helps me to arrive at more creative solutions.

It is not my intention to go into a discussion of change agents. In my view, you probably would not be at this conference if you weren't in the change agent category. Permit me, however, one suggestion for change agents. Hold your goal and its higher intent firmly in your mind and do not become rigidly attached to your ideas of how to get there.

When you return home from this conference, filled with enthusiasm for the potentialities for progress and co-operation, you are likely to encounter some status quo seekers. I hope my remarks will be of some assistance in the situation. Just remember the shift - from being a status quo seeker to being an explorer of transition. With this movement we may be able to forge new links between technological progress and ethical values.

(1) The term organisation is used to include commercial enterprises, governments, international organisations, non-profit institutions and community groups.

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