

breakthrough

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Transformational
CHANGE

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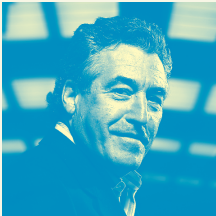
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Transformational Change

Story continued from front cover



The most chilling words I have ever heard to describe a dysfunctional workplace were shared with me by the company's second in command during our very first meeting. "This place," he said "...is an interlocking matrix of hatred." I almost fell out of my chair! I had been used to helping organizations work through conflict and unhealthy levels of internal politics, but that description took the cake.



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According to employee feedback, the organization was like a totalitarian state, where control was maintained through manipulation, public humiliation, and abusive bullying. Employees believed that your career was dependant on your ability to toe the line, keep your mouth shut and your head down. My client and a peer, who had been pitted against each other in the former culture, quickly concluded that they needed to work together closely to bring the culture of dysfunction and despair to an end.

They asked me where to begin. "You will need to retire any fears, disagreements, old baggage, hurt feelings and mistrust that exist between you. There can't be any daylight between you," I said. "Next, you will need to lead your people out of the bunker mentality and into high levels of cooperation, communication and collaboration."

"We think we can do that," they responded quietly.

Slowly, as these two executives worked through their issues, they began to see that they had very similar ideas about the high performance culture they wanted to build. They also discovered that what they had been told about each other had been fabricated to keep them divided and conquered.

As their vision for change grew, they discovered that they actually really enjoyed working together, a possibility that would have been as remote to them previously as winning the lottery. And as their commitment to working together strengthened, their direct reports

began to feel some hope for positive change. Not only did these two leaders resolve their conflicts, even long-standing feuds that had separated departments began to clear. Within a year and throughout the organization, a wary optimism had replaced anger, resentment, resignation and cynicism.

In the second year of the change initiative, people at work were beginning to talk more about a preferred future than a dysfunctional past. Employee attitude surveys revealed trust in the leadership had grown substantially and conditions in the workplace were far healthier than they had been in anyone's memory.

By the third year, you would not have recognized the place. The enthusiasm for change had been adopted deep into the organization and a transformation had taken hold. Passion had returned to most people's attitudes and performance and a majority of people in the organization were actively engaged in re-inventing the customer service model. Now, the conversation at work was about how to improve levels of cooperation and collaboration so the organization could provide better services to its clients and stakeholders and lead its category.

Of course, this kind of transformational change doesn't happen without leadership and courage. It also requires a longer-term commitment to ensure that real change, rather than superficial, cosmetic change, takes hold.

Transformational change requires:

1. A COMPELLING VISION OF THE FUTURE

A common vision is one of the most important ways of "putting the past in the past"- one of the most significant challenges faced at the start of the change process. There was not one person in the organization that didn't have an axe to grind. Our job was to give people something better to focus on than the toxic stew of the past. We worked with the Executive Team to create and communicate a compelling, multi-year vision and strategic plan.

2. REBUILDING TRUST

Trust issues were deep and widespread. Middle management mistrusted senior management, and the whole management team was under enormous scrutiny from employees. We used teambuilding as the vehicle to forge a new partnership between managers and within the organization overall, to get toxic issues on the table, find common ground, and explore ways to restore a healthy business culture. These were difficult and challenging sessions for all participants. Thanks to the courage and leadership of all employees, they were very successful sessions that set the stage for reconciliation and renewal.

3. EFFECTIVE ONGOING COMMUNICATIONS

Previously, internal communication was kept to a minimum. Information was used to pit individuals and groups against each other. Employees in one department were forbidden to talk to their colleagues in other areas of the organization without the express permission of senior management and a supervisor present.

The new leadership team jettisoned this Draconian approach to employee relations and communication practices immediately. In its place a new, open and ongoing dialogue was initiated to inform and engage all employees in change. We worked with the senior management team to create town-hall meetings, regular staff meetings, monthly bulletins and ongoing announcements and updates. These contributed to restoring confidence in the organization, increasing understanding, trust and collaboration, and solving system-wide operational problems.

4. CHANGE CHAMPIONS

Positioning managers and opinion leaders as champions of a new culture was fundamental in over-turning skepticism and cynicism and in setting the stage for a renewed commitment and engagement by employees.

Management courageously faced blame, anger and resentment. They took responsibility for their contribution to the past but ultimately, provided staff with an understanding of what it was like for them working in the old system. This opened many eyes and provided a larger view of how bad systems affect everyone's behavior.

Management at all levels also committed to an annual, rigorous, 360 degree feedback and ongoing performance coaching, which provided them with a vehicle for continuous improvement. This would have been unthinkable before, where a command and control style was the preferred approach to human resource management.

5. EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Gallup studies indicate that employee engagement is the single biggest factor in driving client service and satisfaction. When we first began our work, 90% of employees were angry, pessimistic, disengaged and resistant. In 18 months, that same percentage was optimistic, positive and contributing to the company culture.

One reason for the turnaround was the commitment made at the top to engage employees in designing and building the organization's preferred future. This was accomplished through comprehensive multi-year strategic planning process that involved management and employees in charting a course towards a common destination. Every 90 days, internal strategy teams design activities for the next quarter from clearly articulated corporate and business unit goals and meet to explore how these plans converge so that a system-wide view is maintained. This gives everyone a stake in the journey of change and choices about how that journey will be navigated.

The fire of possibility is always alive, although it may burn as a single ember in a single person. Given the oxygen of true leadership, trust and commitment, it can turn from a glowing coal to a roaring blaze.

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