

The times they are a-changin

*"The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is
Rapidly fadin'.
And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'."*

Bob Dylan, Copyright 1963; renewed 1991 Special Rider Music

Change is all around us. Past assumptions, worldviews and paradigms about how life in the workplace are becoming outdated. Transformation is necessary. We are facing a critical point in how we conduct business.

Dependence on technology-driven growth, our obsession with efficiency, and mechanistic organizational designs are all but dysfunctional in our current workplace culture - increasingly characterized by instability, limited resources and overall strain.

Unfortunately, the call for true change and transformation is either falling on deaf ears or being resisted by those who prefer the status quo. Many business leaders are either waiting for external forces to create change or simply reinforcing what isn't working.

Transactions and Transformation

Two requisite elements of the change process that produce real and positive change are (1) the transactional aspect and (2) the transformational aspect.

The transactional aspect deals with processes and outcomes. The transformational aspect deals with people. Most businesses focus on the former- it's easier than dealing with people.

One challenge for business today is to merge the two aspects in a way that fosters a conscious and healthy redesign of business and eases the tension between the status quo and an emerging future that encourages people to contribute and prosper. Future successful organizations will conduct business less as a mechanistic entity of processes, procedures and outcomes, and more like an ecosystem which takes into account a multidisciplinary approach to work that meets at the intersection of physics, quantum physics, psychology, biology, and neuroscience.

Adaptive strain and adaptive change

In the world of engineering and physics, adaptive strain occurs when tension exists within structures and functions as a result of conflicting events that lead to destabilization. In our business world, we are witnessing this destabilization. In nature, this destabilization is resolved through a process of adaptive change. Living/natural systems adapt to change. They move from equilibrium to stress and strain, adapt and move to another state of equilibrium in a dynamic fashion. Living systems thrive on their interconnectedness and institute course corrections as necessary to produce resiliency.

In human organizations and systems, i.e., our workplace, adaptive change is anything but natural and fluid. The only way businesses can and will survive is if/when folks have a clear vision for their future and a conscious awareness that adaptive change is necessary in order to survive. Many are unable or unwilling to create that vision or hold that awareness. When organizations lack both a vision and awareness, atrophy happens. Transactions break down and the transformational aspect is not even a part of the equation.

The transformational aspect of adaptive change focuses on the people - the psychological, emotional, and spiritual effects that change has on individuals. This is the tough area of change for most folks in organizations, but this is the area that will lead to more effective change and transformation - it's the "irritant like the grain of sand in the oysters shell, that produces the pearl.

Until or unless the transactional and transformational aspects of change work in tandem, true change is almost impossible.

In business, human systems people are often the greatest barrier to change. There is no automatic, natural adaptation that leads to resiliency and equilibrium. When destabilization occurs in business, which is where we are now, fear and resistance often take over and mitigate change. People are afraid of the unknown the future and so dig in their heels and cling on to the status quo. The result is a sense of disorientation and ambiguity, a fear of loss.

The belly of the beast

Most often, true change and transformation can only happen when one hits bottom in business, and in life. The journey through the belly of the beast brings one to a place of deep awareness and response, where intuition, creativity and right knowing, right understanding and right action arise over time and help one move from strain to true change and transformation.

This journey is not quick, nor easy. One must remain in the belly long enough to deeply experience and metabolize the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual chaos that exists. There is no quick fix. Many businesses, however, choose a microwave approach and before long find they are facing the same status quo, the same uncertainty, apathy and cynicism, i.e., business as usual.

Only here, in the belly, where turbulence and disengagement abound, can business discover new insights, strategies, and needs that lead to true re-design. Only here, can business truly grasp the nature of conscious and healthy interconnectedness between the transactional and transformational aspects between procedure/structure and people, between function/process and the psychological/ideological. Here is where new ways of doing and being arise.

Team dynamics

True change and transformation happen when leadership and management become aware of their dysfunctional ways of leading and managing not in their processes, but in their personal style and character, not their business systems but their personal systems.

In this time of change, leaders and managers are called upon to recognize, and own, how their dysfunctional behaviors for example, avoidance of risk-taking, feeling a lack of

confidence and/or helplessness, being disengaged, being untrusting and untrustworthy, refusing to delegate, being fearful of change and ambiguity, needing to have command and control are sabotaging their teams and their organizations, creating added stress, and adversely affecting performance and productivity.

Leaders and managers are facing a significant challenge that is the undertaking of a conscious process of self-reflection so they can genuinely support their organizations to move forward into the future. This journey into the belly of the beast, neither easy nor fun, is what has to occur to move away from the status quo and towards the dynamics that foster successful change and transformation. In fact, all organizational members have to experience this journey if they are to contribute to the change process.

Adaptive change is not the purview of top leaders and managers alone. It's an experience everyone has to encounter as part of the ecological system of the organization. It's a big belly room for everyone. Only through the journey can transparency, trust and collaboration effect change - change that comes as a result of the engagement of every individual. When individuals are caught up in resistance, denial, defensiveness and a fear-based need to hang on to the status quo, change cannot happen.

Only when individuals choose to take the journey, consciously looking within at how their own dysfunctional behaviors mitigate against change, can they begin to adapt and engage in the creative and innovative ways of do-ing and be-ing that reduce the bumps in the road of change and ease the change process. In this way change becomes a competency of both individuals and the organization, where the organization transforms from a mechanistic entity into a truly living organism.

Personal change

The road to adaptive change begins with each individual, in small, incremental ways changing one's mind, one's assumptions, one's worldview, making a decision, creating a strategy, etc. It's here that individuals must willingly choose to look inside, to explore what threatens their self-esteem, their confidence, and face their fears head-on. It's here that one can eliminate self-destructive and self-sabotaging patterns of behavior and begin to engage in new behaviors that are both self-supporting and supportive of the organization.

When change doesn't work

When individuals refuse to take this inner personal journey, and become focused solely on the mechanical/functional aspects, the transactional aspect, of their organization, they most often stay stuck in a cyclical process of failed change, unable to face the strain and adapt. In this place folks generally choose the status quo, are non-trusting of others, fear ambiguity, uncertainty, and loss of control (and actually choose failure - the devil I know vs. the devil I don't type of reactivity to strain), and hang on to strict structure and linearity feeding a false sense of security.

The bottom line of true change and transformation

Navigating the rough and uncertain waters of change will require conscious, honest and self-responsible conversations not only about the transactional aspects of the organization that are counter-productive to change but the transformational people aspects that are preventing needed change.

Resolving strain requires a clear orientation to the realities of the present and the

possibilities of the future, open and sincere collaboration between and among all individuals, and leaders and managers who are trusting and trustworthy. The change process that will ease a smooth transition into the future requires every individual's strength, courage, steadfastness, will and an openness of each individual to look within to explore their psycho-emotional dynamics that serve as obstacles to change. If they choose this path, they're more easily move away from the status quo towards a new, healthier equilibrium.

Some questions for self-reflection:

- Are you and your organization facing the strain of adapting to turbulent times? How do you feel you and your organization are doing?
- Does your organization focus equally on the transactional and transformational aspects of change? If not, why not?
- Are you and your organization using outmoded models and tools to adapt to change?
- Would you describe your organization as an ecological, living system or a mechanistic one? How so?
- Have you, personally, ever experienced the journey through the belly of the beast? What is/was that like for you? What did you see about yourself as a result?
- How do you deal with an uncertain future?
- Do you hang on to your beliefs, worldviews, stories and assumptions at all costs?
- What was strain like for you and your family when you were growing up? How did you and your family cope?
- How do you, personally, deal with change? Honestly.

And the first one now

Will later be last

For the times they are a-changin'.

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