

## Executive Insight >> Thought Leaders

### Rebuilding For Growth

#### Change is a Painful Process

The factory is impressive. Freshly painted, well landscaped and plenty of parking. A contrast to what's happening on the inside.

It's a month into the assignment and the real work is about to begin. A customer survey and internal survey have been completed.

I'm about to roll out a program on self awareness, learning and knowledge to all staff. As I enter the factory, I run into the Managing Director who's on his way out. "Hi Liz. It starts today, does it? I wish you luck. You can't change people you know." I was speechless. He was gone before I made a remark. Only five days before he'd been espousing the necessity for change. The warning lights were there but I didn't have time to address them.

The whole point of the first two hour session, delivered to groups of twelve, was to prepare people for change at the individual level. It covered the cycle for change, reactions, responsibility, attitudes and awareness. It's my belief that change begins from within; much like creativity and innovation. I held several of these sessions over a two week period. In the main, I was greeted with aggression and fear. I received a proverbial mountain of negativity. And, management got it with both barrels; they don't listen, they don't follow up, they sit in ivory towers, they don't keep promises. All the management team attended a session with the exception of the Managing Director. He was invisible.

I had a meeting with two members of the management team who were subsequently devastated by the depth of animosity levelled at their team. They began to become more visible and made a concerted effort to get in touch with the factory floor. In return they were laughed at. Still, they persisted; their courage was admirable and eventually paid dividends.

The next month I'd planned to cover culture and values but decided to focus on communication and conflict instead. That's what people had asked for. People were more receptive. Some still dwelled on problems but there were a smattering who looked for solutions. I mentioned the courage of the members of the management team who had been trying and asked that everyone meet them half-way. Apart from one particular group, this was well received. The Managing Director was still invisible.

At the same time I was working with the management team. They were beginning to think about change themselves. The MD was starting to turn up the heat by barraging them with emails. They were clearly uncomfortable. Not only had they had feedback from staff, their MD was now pummeling them as well. Some vent their anger on support staff, others complained to whoever would listen, some retreated to their caves and one went on holidays. You could smell the fear. Everyone was beginning to see just how necessary change was yet they targeted each other rather than themselves. It was painful to watch yet I intuitively knew they had to go through this process.

Finally the MD summoned his team. He exploded, leaving his team shattered and disheartened. It was clear that no-one was coping with the winds of change. I offered to hold a meeting with them all but they resisted for fear of another outburst from the MD.

While this saga was happening I continued to work across all other functional levels. People began to identify areas for improvement, others began to look for root causes of production problems (rather than symptoms) and people began to ask about training.

If only the Management team could pull themselves together.

The third month of company wide training involved determining a set of shared values everyone wanted; one person – one vote. I was clearly unhappy about the timing of this learning yet sequentially it had to come next.

One of the night shift groups was particularly volatile. I was about to begin when the MD walked in unannounced. "Hi everyone," he began, "can I join you." He sat down and he listened. Someone asked him about his vision for the future. He explained. He addressed WIIFM. He delivered. He listened to the discussion on values.

I challenged him on a couple of points, more as a demonstration of openness than anything else. At the end of the meeting Pamela said quietly, "John, thanks for coming. I've been here for ten years. It's the first time you've listened to us." John looked at her and smiled. "Yes, but it won't be the last," he said quietly.

John attended one of the day shift meetings as well and played the same role. They too were impressed. The impact on the factory floor was amazing

At the end of the day I popped into John's office to thank him for his support. "Have you got a few minutes?" he asked. I sat down. His eyes welled with tears. "You know, I really enjoyed today," he began. "Liz", he continued, "How did I get so far away from my business? They're good people. I used to talk to them. I used to know what was going on..." it was like a soliloquy.

When he'd finished, I smiled. "John, can I ask you a question?" He nodded. "Where does change start John?" I asked softly. He repeatedly pointed to his chest but said nothing. He didn't have to.

I spent the following morning with him. He was a different person. Energised would be apt. Together we worked through a strategy on how he would support and develop his management team.

He decided to make the Operations Manager the General Manager and engage another salesperson. One of the team was to be given three months to improve his performance. At the same meeting he decided his team would undertake immediate leadership training.

The road to growth had begun. It was a painful process but now the real change could begin.

### **Summary:**

*Each person's perceptions are their reality.*

Not understanding this is the fundamental stumbling block in most change initiatives. Before you begin working on the organisation you must work at the individual level. To be told, "Well, you've got to change, you'll just have to adapt" is a trigger for our defence mechanisms to set in. We might dip our toes in the water, but we quickly withdraw and put our socks back on.

At the core of any change effort is motivation. Ask yourself two questions;

'What are the consequences of not changing?'

Then, ask yourself,

'What will the future be like if I choose to change?'



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