

## Crisis? What crisis? You should never miss the opportunity a good crisis provides - test your imagination 16/11/2009

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This tough economic climate has forced every organisation to take a good look at the way they work and for many it has proven to be a real test of their imagination and their leadership skills. But why are some organisations dealing with the challenge so much better than others?

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### Darwinian leadership

There is nothing like a good crisis to galvanise the strong and weed out the weak. The Darwinian nature of business is seen at its most raw during such times. Those organisations that respond with the traditional 'efficiency and cost cutting drive' find they make quick gains then they reach the tipping point where employees simply give in and switch off through a combination of worry and sheer mental and physical exhaustion.

Some employees of course do not give in, they fight back and, as the growing numbers of industrial disputes testify, many are opting to react to the call to work harder for less with an all too familiar response.

## **Enlightened leaders**

However, some enlightened leaders see the current crisis as a real opportunity to become more 'effective' and are using the challenges it creates as a platform to explore ways to genuinely work smarter and not harder. These leaders are identifying all kinds of interesting opportunities to change the way their organisations work.

The old adage that states: 'if you want to know anything about a problem, go and talk to someone who works within 10 feet of where it occurs' is proving to be a hidden gold mine for those organisations prepared to enquire and to really listen. Most people, when asked can they do whatever they're doing any better will answer 'yes'. Let's face it, to answer 'no' is akin to saying we've reached perfection and not many think this. When confronted with this question, asked in a curious rather than threatening way, most people say 'yes'. This in turn prompts the question, 'what stops us'? It's this question that usually produces some very interesting answers, answers that give us a real insight into how the organisation really works.

## **Smarter way of working**

When I ask this 'what stops us?' question the answer I hear is usually some version of 'them; they stop us'. I have noticed the 'them' department rarely appears on any organisational chart or in any workflow or company procedure. Indeed in my experience it's located in various places within the organisation, depending on who is doing the talking.

In the engine room of the organisation the 'them' department is invariably upstairs; with middle managers it is both upstairs and downstairs; and of course with the senior leadership team it is invariably downstairs or even outside.

Getting the 'them' department to work differently should be the collective aim of all organisations looking to find a smarter way to respond to the challenges and opportunities the current crisis creates. Once people realise they are not 'them' and this is not the usual hunt for the guilty, then they usually climb on board.

## **Removing work barriers**

To do this well, leaders have to start with the belief that most people get up in the morning and come to work to do a good job. If they really believe this to be true then their attitude to change begins to shift. I have met very few people who wake up in the morning, spring into action muttering to themselves: 'Ok, let's get into work and see what I can screw up today!' In my experience most people have an inherent desire to work to the best of their ability and are prevented from doing so by a multitude of factors and reasons. Removing these reasons and frustrations and applying encouragement creates the opportunity for people's real potential to grow and flourish. This is a source of energy that once harnessed and directed can produce startling results.

In our most recent book 'Liberating Passion', we explain that the key challenge for any leader is to identify and remove the 'Passion Killers', those habits and rituals that infest many organisations and that simply sap energy and enthusiasm. Once these are identified and removed, the natural desire to do a great job and the curiosity that fuels people who are genuinely engaged in the work they do will drive performance to new, as yet unseen standards of performance.

## **Dealing with resistance to change**

You should not however, underestimate the power of the prevailing habits and ways of employees working to protect themselves. As change agents we often meet this resistance to change and over the years we have developed a deep understanding of what drives such resistance. At its root is fear of the unknown, often topped up with a deep desire not to make a mistake.

Making change seem possible, even exciting and fun is the best antidote to this malaise. Start by creating a compelling picture of the future, one that transcends the current economic climate. We have to change the tune from the somewhat simplistic 'let's cut costs and work harder' message to a more compelling and attractive message filled with hope and desire. This is basic psychology, people move away from pain and towards pleasure. Involving people in the creation of this future state can help drive a desire to change. Engaging them in authentic conversations about the future and carrying out creative 'imagineering' exercises can help bring this picture of the future into focus.

## **Fear of making mistakes**

Fear of making mistakes is the second most common resistance force we encounter. Mistakes of course are all part of the change journey and any attempt to eradicate mistakes is usually counterproductive and results in lots of unnecessary non value adding, Cover Your Ass (CYA) activity and for leaders, leads to the worst malaise of all, decision paralysis. I like the principle of 'if in doubt act!'

Making fast decisions gives you the opportunity to act quickly and by acting you get to see if the decision you have taken is in fact correct. If it isn't then you can correct it. If you take an age to make the 'right' decision and you find it is still 'wrong' then that time consumed making the decision is lost forever.

We find that the way mistakes have been dealt with in the past can really affect how people respond to change in the future. If what we call 'the hunt for the who?' is typical then people who work in the area where mistakes happen quite naturally keep their heads down and do what they are told. If however, 'the hunt for the why?' is unleashed then curiosity and learning quickly follow and this produces a very different response from those who observe mistakes happening.

John Cleese, in his excellent video arts presentation: 'The Importance of Mistakes' successfully argues that mistakes are a crucial part of the creativity process and without a healthy and tolerant attitude towards mistakes nothing of any real value will be delivered. He also made the valuable point that there are of course mistakes and mistakes. Some mistakes simply defy logic and they have no part to play in any organisation, what we need to focus on are the mistakes that occur when people who are clearly doing their best and simply get things wrong. When this occurs an opportunity to change has presented itself so be careful you do not lock it away by unleashing the 'who's fault is it' question.

## **Light touch leadership**

Making change engaging and fun is the best way to develop new ways of working. This requires a light touch leadership style, one that is professional and determined yet does not take things too seriously. We often find when helping teams look at how they work, one of the most effective tools to deploy is to simply hold a mirror up to common practise and current habits. When this is done, well you are left with no alternative but to 'LOL' (laugh out loud) as my text proficient daughters have taught me to say.

The capacity to take what we do for a living both professionally and with a pinch of salt is a key ingredient for people who are looking to survive this current economic crisis. A good sense of humour is a real weapon in the fight to tackle the challenges and opportunities presented to us by the current economic times. It's often muttered at the end of some of our workshops designed to look at the way things work now, 'have you seen what we actually do, you have to laugh!'