

Debbie Nicol on leadership and change: take the positive from any resistance

Debbie Nicol

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‘That’s the way we’ve always done it.’

These words send shivers down the spines of leaders – or do they? One success factor of true leaders and change specialists is an appreciation of differing perspectives that everyone displays. When the leader’s path collides with one that displays a reticence to change and take new directions, these words are simply an opportunity to explore three important questions:

- What is hidden behind the words “that’s the way we’ve always done it”?
- Why does that hidden reality have power over an individual’s performance?
- Do these words determine the degree of willingness of that person to “co-produce” a differing future, one of hope?

What is indeed behind these words?

Words remain words alone unless they are considered along with an emotional intensity and context.

In organisational settings during periods of change, these words spotlight a concern that is likely to have resulted from a lack of understanding. This may or may not have already morphed into resistance. These words may be shared as a means of gaining attention or subconsciously uttered, providing insight into a pain festering within. They may even be intended to open a general discussion showing a curiosity to know more.

What’s behind these words is an emotional reaction to a suggestion of change; destabilisation is a real option for those who utter these words. It’s at this stage an individual’s context will become evident, as throughout a leader’s efforts to work with this situation, what is driving the resister will become apparent. Is it something physical that will be exposed, challenged or depleted through the change? Is it something mental where limited cognition is perceived as a barrier or disruptive factor? Is it a concern based on socio-economic reasons that has the person worried?

Ultimately, a need for “more” is present. For the current behaviour to convert to a new norm, an individual will require more awareness as to the reasons for change which then should feed into more of a desire to make the change happen, and even more need for knowledge of how to change.

Why does that possess power over personal performance at work?

Emotional responses are charged with energy. That energy is invested in the tightening of a person’s grip around “the tried, true and trusted”. Survival mode kicks in and while the “need for more” exists, it will be secondary at this stage; workplace performance, counselling or assistance has no place on the agenda.

When energy is channelled into the survival mechanism, flight or fight syndrome is activated. For those who choose flight, the reaction is swift and sudden. For those who choose fight, the journey can be long, worrisome and arduous. Both negate any chance of workplace performance, as the template of the “known” is all-important; even if there was an interest in work, the effort going into “hanging on” is exhausting and depletive. Stability is at risk and there’s great likelihood for loss.

Human beings by instinct choose to be forward-facing, rejecting any form of loss, deprivation or reduction of benefit and self-worth.

What is the degree of willingness to “co-produce” a future of hope?

“Co-production” is about a willingness of both parties to be involved in a situation. The leader who sees opportunity in reticence can reduce the chance of fear, increase the opportunity of “the known”, increase the probability of some form of stability to return as soon as possible and reduce the chance of loss. By doing so, they will appreciate the age-old Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, providing for the foundation of safety, security and self-esteem before expecting creativity, problem solving and a willingness to contribute.

Leaders in touch with their senses should not miss indicators of inner misalignments and negative influence. Indicators exist in the spoken word and in overt and covert body language.

Let’s celebrate negative indicators as an opportunity, recognise the vulnerability that comes hand-in-hand with reticence and take it into the land of greater understanding.

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