

Change Can Be Scary, But it Can Also Make Us Stronger

Change. Just the thought of it brings up a whole mixed-up array of emotions. And asking the question, "Is change good or bad?", produces a million different answers! The exact same change, eg: a walking-only community allows cars for the first time, can seem resoundingly positive to some (saves time and energy, allows non-ambulatory people more social interaction and control of their lives) and profoundly negative to others (increases auto accidents, reduces community feeling and opportunities for neighbors to chat and interact). The truth is, change is not simply "yes or no", "good or bad", "black or white". It produces a whole spectrum of results, feelings and outcomes and is far too large of a topic to be fully addressed in one blog. But one aspect of change seems to be true across all industries and individuals and can be addressed here...and that's this one: "Why do we resist change when our current plan isn't working?"

One obvious reason we resist change is that it's often expensive. But, while cost is a very valid, real reason why we don't make changes that are clearly necessary, it's also the problem most simply resolved (we either commit to finding the money or we stop considering the change) and it's the easiest excuse to use, providing us cover when the real reason for resistance is something a little deeper. So, let's take cost out of the equation and examine why, even when presented with an affordable option, many of us remain reluctant to change.

There are two primary reasons behind people's resistance to change. I will be discussing each separately, but they are intertwined in many ways.

The first reason is a lack of TRUST. Often, we are approached by someone we don't know and asked to make a change we aren't expecting. We are told that the new 'solution', the new product or service someone is trying to convince us to adopt, is the perfect one and is an imperative change for our organization's survival or success. But how do we know we can trust this person or their information? It's often nearly impossible to comprehensively test the prospective solution or ensure that it truly is the miracle cure promised. And even if a demonstration seems to show this solution to be an improvement over our current situation, it only takes one bad encounter with a less-than-honest salesperson to leave us forever suspicious of anyone or anything new.

The second reason we resist change is FEAR. No sooner do we formulate the thought that this new solution might actually be worth considering, than our minds start racing. "How will my staff react to having to learn and use a new product?", "What if we get knee-deep into this change and discover that this solution isn't actually any better than what we have now, just fraught with different problems?", "What if this solution is actually worse and it costs me the respect of my staff and peers or even costs me my job?". More times than I can count, someone has told me they're sticking with their current system because at least it's the devil they know. They may not like the solution they have, but they have learned to work with it and they're afraid to upset the apple cart with something new.

But if we let these fears and suspicions be our only guides, we are forfeiting our potential to grow. Growth IS change. And in practical terms, almost no method or system is endlessly scalable. At some point, growth is limited by the narrowest part of the path from the present to the future. We must have the vision to widen the path we're on or forge a new and better one.

So, does that mean we should just jump at everything new that crosses our desk. Of course not! Just as we need to change in order to grow, we need stability in order to develop. If we're constantly making changes, we never get the time to do our actual work.

So, where does that leave us?

When it comes to TRUST, approach every meeting with someone new with a TRUST but VERIFY mentality. Most salespeople genuinely believe in their products and want to provide potential customers a solution that makes our work easier and our lives better. And many are almost as inspired by our work and our mission as we are! But ultimately, the way they make a sale is by proving that their solution is better than what we are currently doing. If you think a new solution may have potential, take the time to explore it. Test real-life scenarios, demo its handling of the situations that confound your current system, ask to talk to current customers whose complexities and challenges are similar to yours. Get to know the solution and, in doing so, get to know your salesperson. If they can demonstrate that their solution is better for your organization, fantastic! If in doing so, you gain an understanding of one another and develop a mutually beneficial relationship, even better! Everybody wins!

As for the FEAR of change, this is a tough one. Fear is an emotion that keeps us safe. Our DNA is programmed to help us avoid dangerous situations. But facing our fears makes us strong. The best way to overcome the fear of change is to specify exactly what you're afraid of and address each fear one-by-one. If sunlight is the best disinfectant, it's also the best mitigator of fear...after all, most monsters live in the dark. If you're afraid that your staff will reject a proposed solution, include them in the demos and discussions. Make sure their most time-consuming issues are addressed by the new solution. Ask questions about post-implementation support and request access to a demo version of the new solution so your whole staff can explore it. Remember that no solution is perfect and someone will always be unhappy, but if you are doing what is best for your shelter, then you have no reason to fear a well-researched change.

In 1967, former British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, said "He who rejects change is the architect of decay. The only human institution which rejects progress is the cemetery." Roughly 200 years earlier, Benjamin Franklin had put it more succinctly, "When you're finished changing, you're finished." Across the centuries and across the globe, people have needed encouragement to enact change. It's hard. It's scary. It's much, much easier to just not do it. But the changes driven by these two gentlemen improved individual lives and entire societies for generations after their own and shaped the narratives of entire countries. They weren't always right and they weren't always popular, but they had in common an ability to envision a future that was better than the present and the courage to do the work to get there. When the next opportunity for change comes your way and you feel the familiar tug of resistance, ask yourself if it's TRUST or FEAR that's holding you back. Then form the relationships, ask the questions, involve the people, challenge the systems, identify the bottlenecks, light up the dark corners and jump headlong into CHANGE anyway.

