Supporting a Leader Through Change

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My intention in writing this article is to share my reflections on how consultants can best support leaders who are addressing organizational change. Given our current insights as to the importance of leader behavior (relational skills, emotional intelligence, social networking, the ability to create new architectures for change etc) supporting the leader (as the intervener) represents a great point of leverage. Having a framework for how change occurs and a grasp of a few, reliable touchstones for when and how to enter a consulting relationship, have been critical to my learning over 25 years and the hallmark of a few success stories. This article, which builds on the work of Peter Block, Peter Koestenbaum, Bob Marshak, Edie and Charlie Seashore and others, emphasizes the quality of the relationship between the consultant and the leader, and how the consultant may use this relationship as a gateway to bring value to each situation.

To deepen my own understanding of how change happens, I created a model of the dynamic and repeating patterns of relationships and complexities between the internal and external forces at play in the midst of change. This model helps me to anticipate some of the variables that the leader and I may need to consider. For the purpose of this article my discussion of the model is limited to an exposition of questions to be explored as the leader and I address the work of each phase. And, while the model may suggest a linear unfolding, the questions that I pose may become pertinent at any stage of the engagement.

A Description of the Flow Process of the Change Model

Event: Some event or intersection of environmental conditions stimulates a tension and activates or makes visible drivers for the notion of, and/or need for, change.

A Model of Change

Drivers: Drivers may include external and internal, macro or micro forces or conditions affecting the current and/or future climate, culture, directions and outcomes of change. An internal driver, for example, might be resistance to change. An external example might be economics affecting budgets, growth and markets.

Readiness: The leader consciously decides to enter and own a change and begins to shape some view of a desired outcome. She may decide to become involved for a variety of reasons - to maximize an opportunity, to minimize a threat, or to attend to a deeply held personal or organizational value that is at risk, for example.

Chaos, Conflict, Confusion: When a leader enters a change situation, she is initiated into the scope of existing chaos, conflict and confusion. Here begins a sorting process of determining what might be useful to examine further, to continue and/or to give up.

Inquiry: A leader then becomes curious, and develops and explores questions that uncover themes regarding what might be happening in the system. She gathers validating data, and develops a focus which lays a foundation for strategies.

Strategies: Then she must develop such strategies - taking into account factors such as priorities, feasibility, budgets and political and environmental concerns.

Clarity, Alignment, Energy: Implementing these strategies affords the organization the opportunity to gain clarity, achieve alignment and focus its energy towards the future.

The primary work of the consultant is to support the leader through each of these phases; helping her to consider the mindsets that may have created the current conditions and how these mindsets might require fundamental shifts for real change to occur. The type of groundwork that I will describe ensures the consultant's ability to bring fresh perspectives to the relationship which support the crystallization of the goal and the strategic policies, practices and interactions that must be forged to achieve the goal.

The *Readiness* Phase

Readiness is the place where the destruction of current reality begins. It is the initial awareness of the metaphoric death of what has existed in the past. It is an initiation into another level or depth in the life of an organization. Metaphorically, it is the edge of the deep water. In the conversations I convene with a leader in this phase of the flow, I am determining who and where the leader is, and

how she is assessing the challenge ahead.

Supporting the leader during this phase:

I, as the consultant, approach the leader with whom I am working, as I am and with the competencies I have. Before I engage with a client, I prepare for our work together. I think about who I am, what I bring, and how these qualities might be useful in our relationship. And I ask myself a few key questions:

- What is your genius (that part of you that is truly you) and how will you bring it to the engagement?
- What are your values, experiences, interests and competencies, and how will you apply them here?
- How well do you understand the client and the system?
- How will you raise the uncomfortable questions that get to the heart of the matter from the very start?
- Where will you be challenged?

To be an effective consultant, I need to know and reflect on such questions. My reflection has helped me to think of my work as a calling, in response to inequities that I see in the world and the gifts that I have been given. My experience growing up as a Catholic, with working class roots in southern West Virginia, forms the basis of my offering as a consultant and this includes my ideas on heart, soul, social justice (oppression of ignorance), presence, voice and in working at the margins. It also infuses my sense of humor and sense of play while I work. I bring these qualities to every engagement: they form a foundation as I move into the work.

Throughout an engagement I also use my intuition. I reflect on my past experience with leaders in similar situations and with my engagements with them, and notice the patterns that exist and the lessons learned from these encounters. I then compare and contrast this leader and her situation with those other leaders and their situations, to identify the assumptions I am making, to develop insights and to ask better questions.

The questions I ask enable me to understand:

- The leader's level of self-awareness and her sense of purpose.
- Her awareness of the betrayals that are occurring and some sense of how she plans to address them.
- How she engages with Self and the organization.
- Her direction, and definition of any sense of urgency.
- Her level of motivation and resistance/denial.
- Her awareness of anxiety and isolation.
- Her ownership of the change.
- Her assumptions and language about the change (which includes the metaphors and communication patterns she uses).
- Her awareness of likely sabotage of the change.
- Her readiness, and also my willingness to nudge this readiness along.
- Her understanding of the system and how trustful she is of it.

The questions I use to explore these issues are important to me because I need to know early in the relationship whether or not the leader is able and willing to enter into a partnership with me, and do the necessary personal work. Even with incomplete answers to these questions, I am able to evaluate the situation and know what we may be facing as we move into the next phase.

Before we leave this phase of the 'flow', though, I offer some thoughts about the notions of 'betrayal' and 'sabotage' - language which frames some of the deeper consequences of change. Any new course of action betrays what has come before it because it changes the way things have been done previously. For example, a leader who is driving the growth of an entity will invariably challenge some of the values, beliefs and ways of working that have defined its success to date. These 'betrayals' need to be acknowledged as a minimum, but rarely are. Every system, including an individual leader system, will also offer some level of sabotage. It is a natural phenomenon. For me, the question is not whether there will be sabotage, only what form will it take, and how will the leader deal with it within herself and within the organization?

The *Chaos, Conflict and Confusion* and *Inquiry* Phases

The mythic equivalent of the Chaos, Conflict and Confusion, and subsequent Inquiry phases is the leader stepping off the known path into the dark forest and beginning a search or quest. Things are uncertain. The way is unknown and uncharted. At a personal and organizational level, structures, roles and relationships are in a state of disintegration. This is a time of difficulty because the leader exists with a variety of tensions that must be maintained, while she and the organization begin to explore the nature of current and future reality.

Supporting the leader during these phases:

From a consulting perspective, here are some practices I find helpful as I prepare to support a leader during this timeframe.

- Doing the shaman work that the leader does not know how to do. This includes establishing processes that deal with the mysterious things that need to be unearthed, discovered, dreamed about or envisioned. It also means helping to build the capacity of the leader and the organization.

- Being a good midwife. Mid-wives attend to births and deaths, holding things, carrying things and letting things go in order to bring about the intended result. This role is important because our work involves metaphoric issues of birth and death and the space in between. Initiating change is about determining what is to die, how or if it will be buried, and what will be born in its place. Two capacities are needed by a consultant at this time:

- Maintaining your presence. Presence is a quality that enables you to be accepted and trusted by a leader. It includes characteristics of authenticity and integrity. It requires the skills of paying attention, being centered, reading signals, and being or responding in the moment (ie not being reactive). It also requires you to take a stand to be effective, meaning making the decision to be someone for the leader and the organization.
- Being able to see and hold polarities and tensions until the appropriate time when insights will occur. Examples of such polarities and tensions include the dichotomies of stability and change, being closed versus being open (around feedback, the process etc), holding action and taking action.

The focus of my questions during these phases provides indications of how we should proceed from here, and what may be required of me. I seek to understand:

- The leader's ability to engage Self and effectively communicate what is important.
- Her ability to handle ambiguity.
- The level of trust the leader invites and generates.
- The nature of her relationship with others.
- Her level of preparedness to ask questions, receive feedback, engage the imagination and commitment of others to make substantive change.
- Her ability to communicate and describe changes in an effective manner.

The *Strategies* and *Clarity, Alignment and Energy* Phases

It is in these phases where the birth of something actually occurs - and the trauma that is associated with it. Clearly, these phases involve establishing some sort of direction or vision, creating a plan, moving through implementation and evaluating the results of the change.

Supporting the leader during these phases:

This is the time of accountability: for the consultant, the leader and the organization. Will I and they have the courage to continue to resolution? It is also the time, as a mid-wife of the process, when I begin to let go of, and/or manage differently, those things that I may have been holding onto; and to surface and challenge any lingering assumptions in the light of my real experience.

My questions of the leader in these phases help me to understand:

- Her intention of, and courage to, implement the change.
- Her commitment to continue to build capacity in the organization, if such is possible.
- How she will manage the tensions of planning and implementing.
- How she will measure progress, and be accountable to the organization for it.

- How she will deal with internal and external resistance and sabotage.
- How she will she enter and manage new relationships, roles and structures.
- How we will evaluate and/or conclude our consulting engagement.

Personal Reflections

I have always wished to help people. As a young man, I observed groups - how they worked - and thought about how I might help. I was curious about how leaders and participants sometimes became 'stuck'. I was genuinely (and naively) surprised about how people seemed unable to track their own dynamics - what was 'going on' in their system. I could clearly see patterns of behavior but, when I attempted to 'help', one of two outcomes would occur. There would either be benign neglect on the part of members of the group, meaning "We will pretend not to notice what he has brought to our attention, and hope he doesn't bring it up again". Or I would experience the 'Alpha Dog smack down', meaning that I was put in my place!

I realize now that, in those early days, I was full of commitment but, perhaps, had little competence to act. The permanence of my scars from those days are still shaping my view that attention to preparation and continuous learning creates a grounding that allows us to be present to what is occurring in the moment and flexible to create meaningful options for how to respond. I also realize that the act of preparation is probably as essential for my grounding as the structure of my plans. As the iconic American author, salesperson, and motivational speaker Zig Ziglar said: "What you get by reaching your destination is not nearly as important as what you will become by reaching your destination."

In closing, I cite Bill O'Brien, former CEO of The Hanover Insurance Company, who, after twenty years of working with some of the top consultants in the field, states that: "The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener." In this article I have attempted to share from my experience some of the practices that I believe are required to nurture that interior condition, to enable us to be of service when we are presented with the opportunity to partner with leaders who are facing the complexities of driving change. It is my hope that these insights will motivate you to be intentional about capturing and applying your own wisdom about how you can use your Self to best effect in your work in the development of organizations.

BIOGRAPHY

NTL member Rick Rocchetti has consulted with organizations for over 25 years. He focuses on leadership, change, systems, strategy, and organization culture. Rick has advanced degrees from Fordham University in the Bronx, NY and from the American University (AU/NTL) in Washington, DC. He currently directs both the Organization Development and Training functions for the City of Raleigh, North Carolina, USA. Rick has an independent consulting, coaching and training practice.

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