

A quarterly publication service
produced by
LIVE Consultants Inc.

October 1995
Number 78

MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Communication

From the Editor

If you could ask anybody — either living or dead — any question, who would you ask and what would the question be?

The trouble that I would have is narrowing down the field of candidates *and* what I wanted to ask. So many people, so many questions.

I'd want to ask Judas why he did what he did. I'd ask Socrates what his favourite question was and from Columbus I'd want to know the secret behind his ability to sell. I'd ask Nellie McClung why she didn't give up and Joan about courage.

The list goes on.

From Leonard Cohen's Suzanne I'd want to know about love and I'd want to ask Ghandi about personal power. I'd ask Sir John A about dreams and visions.

The answers would challenge and chide, prod and provoke.

That's part of what we do as management educators: find good questions that challenge organizations to think like they never have before.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Let me guess how many times you've heard this statement — *they just don't get it*. Maybe twice a week, every week, since the early 1990s?

And what many people don't seem to get is how much life is changing. Some folks just haven't caught on that the same-old-same-old doesn't cut it. Frustrated by those that haven't clued in, some managers use the size and scope of change as a way of frightening people into new behaviour. However, as Stephen writes, "Instead of using change as a way to kick butt, our task is to help those we lead make sense of how the world is changing."

Stephen Baetz is a principal partner of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization sponsoring this publication.



Stephen Baetz

Make Sense

If you've been a manager or supervisor for more than 10 years, you probably can remember the gymnastics class with Herzberg. In most programs, he followed Maslow's needs hierarchy. Herzberg was an intellectual gymnast who expected us to stretch our minds and tone our managerial muscles with ideas like ... *just because you're not dissatisfied doesn't mean you're satisfied and hygiene factors just make sure you're not dissatisfied but because you're not dissatisfied doesn't mean you're satisfied.*

Once you tried to untangle yourself from that intellectual knot, he would tie you up with this assertion — *movement is different than motivation.* Let's see if I can remember this correctly. Movement you get through either a positive or a negative KITA — kick in the anatomy. A positive KITA was a carrot like bonus money or a trip and a negative KITA was a threat or minimizing. Motivation, on the other hand, was not in a manager's control directly. Motivation was an inside job, owned by every employee. A manager only could create an environment that would encourage motivated behaviour.

As painful as the class may have been, most of us felt the better for it. We were relieved to find out that our primary task was to create an environment. Every employee would respond positively to environments that encouraged achievement, gave recognition, provided personal growth and advancement, and afforded opportunities for challenging work. Threatening employees was out of fashion! It was only Theory X managers — oh how we loved to mix 'n match concepts and theories with reckless abandon — who, because they were tied to faulty assumptions about human nature, couldn't help themselves. So they would monitor, control, direct, and when necessary, threaten.

With enough time passing, some of us even came to the conclusion that scaring, threatening, alarming, and intimidating employees went out with pez, bellbottoms, platform shoes, and mixing plaids with prints. That was the 1970s. The enlightened manager in this decade knew better.

Or so we thought.

I think some managers have just found another way to frighten people. It's called *change*. They make change so frightening, so consuming, so terrifying, they don't even use the word out loud. They call change *IT* — *IT*'ll do us in unless we're careful ... *IT* will make us different ... There isn't anybody who is not going to be affected by *IT*. *IT* is a big problem for most organizations. *IT* affects every part of our lives.

Strange as it may sound, I think many managers have used change as the new KITA to frighten employees into action. And managers who long ago bought Herzberg's ideas and swore they would never use a negative KITA are some of the worst offenders. Without knowing it, they run around like Chicken Little predicting an end to the world as we know it because change is happening. In their hurry and scurry they create movement prompted by anxiety, fear, or threat but not a positive, intrinsic desire to improve.

The way to avoid that old-style management technique is to add an item to the already long list of management responsibilities: one of the responsibilities of management is to *make sense*.

That's right. Instead of using change as a way to kick butt, our task is to help those we lead make sense of how the world is changing and how they might respond.

Kitchen Table Communication

There was a time in our house when meals were survived. Marilyn and I would take up our battle positions on either side of the boys and hope that we would make it through the next half hour with a decibel level below 90 and a minimum number of spills.

But as time passed, the kitchen table evolved from battleground to common ground. It was here that we tried to make sense of what had happened during the day. It was a time when we tried to figure out *why*, a time when we grappled with what should be done next.

Family kitchen tables taught values, provided insights, created context, made life understandable.

Managers, it seems to me, ought to be having kitchen table conversations that move from battleground discussions about change to common ground dialogues that help corporate life make sense.

Try these suggestions that I've learned in both the kitchen and the conference room.

Suggestion #1: Listen.

No one can hear who hasn't been heard. So before you offer what you know, what you have seen, what you have experienced, listen to what their worries and concerns are. Ask questions, as well, that will help you understand what they know and what they don't know: What changes are they imagining? What do they see for themselves in the future? What apprehensions do they have? What facts are they missing? What misconceptions do they hold?

When you listen first, two things happen. Others are more willing to reciprocate and listen to you later *and* you know how to shape your communication relative to their needs.

Suggestion #2: Be factual.

When describing what you see happening or what you see changing, use language that is neutral and factual. Language that is full of commentary and bias will generate emotional responses in others that will increase worry and apprehension.

Tell the members of your team both what you know and what you don't know as well as what you know but can't tell for reasons of corporate confidentiality.

Around the conference table say, "Here are the changes I know about and that I have observed." By being factual and sharing fully what you know, you respect the other people on your team as mature individuals who are capable of making up their own minds and coming to appropriate conclusions.

Suggestion #3: Ask them what conclusions they would draw.

This is the area of management and leadership where we are seeing the most difference. In the past, managers would have moved right into telling mode with a speech that would have gone, "And given those realities, here's what we need to be doing right now." Full stop, no dialogue.

As facilitators around the corporate kitchen table our task is different. We have to help others see the implications, assess the options, and draw their own conclusions. So it's questions we ought to be asking.

- Now that we know this, what do we know?
- What do these realities mean for us?
- What changes will we need to make?
- How does this mesh with our mission, vision, and values?
- How will this affect what we do on a day-to-day basis?
- What concerns do we have about the changes we see we have to make?
- How can we support each other through these changes?
- Where do you think these changes will take us in the future?

Making meaning is not telling; making meaning is asking and helping others come to their own conclusions.

Suggestion #4: Do It Often.

The maturity of individuals happens as a result of regular, daily conversations around the kitchen table. In fact, it would be absurd to think that any maturity could occur if we only carried out such dialogues once a year.

Likewise, the development of team member maturity can't be left to a once-a-year planning event or conference. Meeting to understand change, to think about impacts, or to anticipate what the future might be like has to be a regular, predictable activity ... otherwise change will be nothing more than a threat.

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