

## Leading change through storytelling

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Is your team about to go through a major change?

If so, there are many models and techniques that can guide you through the change process, but do they really engage people?

Many of us can recite personal experiences of working through a change or transition. Sharing compelling stories and lessons learned can be a powerful tool to help a team navigate obstacles and lead through uncertainty.

A simple exercise you can perform with your team is to ask them: “When you last went through a major change, what was the biggest challenge you faced?” and “What was your greatest learning point?”

This exercise helps individuals and teams to reflect and realize how much relevant experience they already have. Change presents uncertainty but once people realize they have experience they can apply, and take action, it typically becomes a lot easier.

I recite a story of when I was a young manager in the early 1990s and in successive short periods went through a significant downsizing, followed by an outsourcing. In both cases I had to step-up and fill the shoes of my former bosses and build new relationships, while continuing to deliver.

What really made a difference was that our department head was right there, at the helm, encouraging and supporting us in taking risks – empowering us to lead and make decisions with fewer resources, mentoring us and negotiating for us.

He was humble – often stating that he didn’t have all the answers. He gave us his viewpoint and then asked us what we thought and who should take ownership. He provided a framework for us to make decisions where there was no clear or right answer, and where we otherwise would have procrastinated.

What I learned from this process was that my previous fear of change had come from two sources:

- Not knowing all the answer to my questions
- Uncertainty as to whether I would be backed if (or should I say, when) I made a mistake

As soon as I was released from these fears, encouraged by my boss I made major strides forward.

He was extremely good at telling stories of previous changes he’d experienced (both as a recipient and a driver of change). He highlighted that other departments were often going through equal, if not greater change, and that our being able to help our customers and line teams would be a great way to demonstrate our service and leadership.

One of the biggest transition challenges I faced was managing my former peers following outsourcing. I became their client relationship manager and they became my vendor partner. This was exaggerated by the fact that all of my peers were simultaneously outsourced. For a while I struggled with how to behave with these former “team-mates.” Once I realized that we now had different objectives and responsibilities, I was able to form a new professional relationship and things became easier.

By telling stories, leaders can help their team visualize the future, understand that obstacles and uncertainty are a natural part of the change process, and can encourage and motivate them to lead and be change agents.

Team members can be empowered to develop action plans of what they can personally do to manage the change, for example: transitioning roles effectively, identifying gaps and taking ownership, helping their line team and their customers transition.

The next time you and your team are facing a change program, ask yourself “What skills and change experience can I leverage?” and “What compelling story can I share?”